THE HIGHWAY OF FATE

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BY ROSA N. CAREY

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THE HIGHWAY OF FATE

BY

Rosa Nouchette Carey

AUTHOR OF "RUE WITH A DIFFERENCE,"
"HERB OF GRACE," ETC.

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THE HIGHWAY OF FATE

CHAPTER I

THE END HOUSE

Let us wait till the hour of sacrifice sounds; till then, each man to his work. The hour will sound at last; but let us not waste all our time in seeking it on the dial of life.—MAETERLINCK.

"HATH this childie been already baptized?"

A sudden pause. Two voices raised at that moment in heated discussion dropped into shocked silence. Some one said, "Hush, children!" rather plaintively from the couch; a frank, girlish laugh followed the maternal chiding. Then a distinctly irritated man's voice struck the keynote of authority—"Lot, come here; what do you mean by disobeying me in this fashion? Have I not forbidden you and Judy to play at these improper games? What do you mean by it, eh, sir?"

"It is all your fault, Shirley," interposed an amused voice, struggling to be serious, as a solid-looking, solemn-faced boy came to his father's knee, and stared at his irate countenance in some perplexity. "Poor little Lot," continued the speaker, "what is the use of scolding such a baby? I told you and Lucia that he was far too young to go to church, but you would not listen to me; and all those babies being christened have excited his little brain." But Lot was too much engrossed with his

endeavours to propitiate his own familiar Jove and arrest the thunderbolts of wrath to heed his aunt's kindly defence.

"Lot is not a naughty boy, fadder," he observed anxiously; "it is a welly nice churchy game. That is what the gentlemans in the white pinny said, 'Hath this childie been already baptized?'"

"Stuff, nonsense," still irritably. "Look here, girls, I have no time for all this rubbish. Judy, take Lot up to the nursery, and play with your bricks or marbles, and your mother will talk to you another time. Ah, well, well, I am not angry," with a hearty kiss on the offender's plump cheek, "but that sort of game won't do, my little man."

"Come on, Lot, exclaimed Judy boisterously—she was a dark-eyed, robust-looking child, a year or two older—"we will build our Tower of Babel instead." But as the door closed on the children, they could hear Lot's voice raised in piteous protest:

"It was such a welly nice game, Judy. Lot doesn't want Babels with nasty messy bricks."

"That is the worst of having children about," continued Dr. Cleveland angrily, "they interrupt everything. Well, Eunice, there is no good resuming the discussion; we have each had our innings, and, as far as I can see, it is a drawn game, and we may as well pull up the stumps and go about our business."

"But, dear Shirley," pleaded the girl with great earnestness, "surely my arguments have convinced you that I am acting on principle and not from caprice or desire for change. No, no, wait a moment," as the doctor rose to his feet with an impatient gesture, "I am not going to bother you any more; I only want to say one thing. It is no pride, no sense of independence that induces me to leave you. You know that, do you not, dear, and how dearly I love my home?" and here there was a sudden choke in Eunice's voice; "but I will not, I will not," with a little stamp of her foot, "I will not

consent to add to your burdens; no, it is no good your talking any more. When dear mother left me to your care and Lucia's there was only Daisy in the nursery, and now there are all these boys, and Judy."

"I do not deny we have our quiver full," returned her brother drily, "but there is still the bit and the sup for our sister, eh, Lucia?" with an appealing glance at the pale woman on the couch.

Dr. Cleveland had still a faint hope that the wife of his bosom would be on his side, but in this he was mistaken. Lucia, whose sense of right was very strong, had gone over to the enemy; the Cleveland household was divided, and the standard of revolt was raised.

"Indeed, Shirley," she replied tearfully—Lucia was an emotional woman and had nerves—"I am sure none of you will miss Eunice as I shall, for she has been my right hand for years; the home will not be the same place without her; but, all the same, I must own that she is right. With all these growing boys, and so little coming in, and you so overworked, and nothing put by for the future, oh, I do thing Eunice is wise to try and earn something for herself."

"Thank you, Lucia. I am glad my sister-in-law is such a sensible, practical woman." Then Dr. Cleveland grunted something inarticulate. Eunice declared afterwards that he said, "Hang the new woman," or words to that effect, but though he frowned, he offered no further opposition. He had simply no ground to stand upon. What was the use of arguing that black was white, and right wrong? How was he to continue the war of words when he himself agreed with his adversary?

The whole thing was as plain as a copybook sentence. He was a clever, kind-hearted man, handicapped by being tied in partnership to an old-fashioned practitioner, who called himself a physician, and whose crass stupidity and wrong-headedness were ruining his partner's temper.

In public Dr. Cleveland treated his elderly coadjutor with respect; but in private—to his wife and sister—he

had more than once spoken of him contemptuously as a pompous old idiot, who was only fit to administer doses to hypochondriac old women. "If I could only free myself from old Sandford," he would say, rubbing up his hair in an irritable fashion, "but here I am tied by the leg. If he would only read and take in some of the modern ideas, but one fool makes another, and all the old ladies on Langton Green believe in him. He has a taking manner, you see."

"Yes, he has a taking manner," his wife had agreed. "He may not be very clever, as you say, Shirley, but he is kind, and never minds any amount of trouble. You know how fond old Mrs. Pilkington was of him. If she had not believed in him she would never have left him all that money."

The mention of Mrs. Pilkington was a mistake on Lucia's part, but she was often wanting in tact. She regretted her allusion when she saw the ominous blackness of her husband's brow. Dr. Cleveland was not meek by nature, though his patients would not have endorsed this, for in the sick-room he was invariably gentle; but hard work, an uncongenial partner, an increasing family, insufficient means, and last, but not least, his wife's feeble health, had tried his temper; and the Pilkington case was always to him what the proverbial red rag is to a bull—it simply infuriated him. But no one—not even Lucia—guessed the real reason, for Dr. Cleveland guarded his professional secrets well; but in his inner consciousness he knew that his partner's obstinacy and wrong-headedness had been the cause of the old lady's death. He had refused to try the new-fashioned treatment that the younger man had strongly advised, and the result was sudden collapse and death. "And I could have saved her," Dr. Cleveland said to himself bitterly as he left the house; "there was no need for her to die, only——" but the rest of that sentence is better left unfinished.

Dr. Sandford was well off, and hardly needed the

Pilkington legacy, for he had no family; but Dr. Cleveland was a poor man, and his affairs were by no means in a flourishing condition. His patients were principally among the poorer classes and small shop-keepers. The well-to-do people who inhabited the pretty old-fashioned houses on Langton Green invariably sent for Dr. Sandford. He paid such long visits, and was so kind and comforting, and never hurried them, or pooh-poohed their little ailments as the younger doctor did. He did not flurry nervous old ladies by throwing up windows with a jerk and letting in a draught, and telling them that air and sunshine would do more for them than tonics. As Miss Marden once remarked, "I daresay Dr. Cleveland is clever, my dear, but he is so east-windy and bracing, and as Jenny and I are getting on in years, our good old friend Dr. Sandford suits us best."

This was the opinion of the leading ladies of Langton Green; but Mrs. Everitt, the grocer's wife, a mild, subdued-looking woman, who was consumptive, and had lost most of her children, would have told a different tale.

"I have had my troubles," she said once to her clergyman, "for Everitt and me have buried five dear children, and my bad health is a heavy cross to me; but I will not deny I have my blessings too, and Dr. Cleveland is one of them, and but for him I'd have been in my grave long ago."

So Dr. Cleveland pocketed his patients' modest fees and their gratitude together, and turned up the collar of his old greatcoat on a cold November evening, and thought ruefully of the coal bill that was still unpaid, and of the new boots and blankets that Lucia had just told him were absolutely necessary, and perhaps—for human nature is human nature—he remembered the Pilkington guineas flowing in to the Sandford coffers. For unequal are the lots of men in this world,—on one hand, a well-stocked nursery and empty coffers, and hag-ridden care with sharp tooth and nail ready to strew nocturnal couch with thorns; and, on the other

hand, a full purse and empty rooms, and old hearts craving for strong young sons and daughters to make their age green and fruitful—but craving in vain.

Only his intimate friends guessed at the extent of Dr. Cleveland's difficulties, for he and his wife presented brave faces, and tried, as far as lay in their power, to keep up appearances.

They lived in a good house looking over the Green, his father had left it to him; and as they had to pay no rent, and it was only just large enough to hold them, and was exactly suitable for a medical man, Dr. Cleveland continued to occupy it without any twinges of conscience.

It was rather a pretty, old-fashioned house, and it justified its name of the End House by being the last of a row. The living rooms overlooked the Green—people always said the view from the drawing-room window was so pleasant.

The little Green with its intersecting paths and seats was so quaintly peaceful; and across it, on the opposite side, were a few old houses, and the red-brick church and schools, and the Vicarage, where the Rev. Hugh Bonar and his bustling little wife and rosy-faced children lived.

It was rather an old-world corner, but beyond it, as the Vicar and Dr. Cleveland knew, there lay dingy streets and squalid alleys and shabby little shops, where the County Council and Parochial officials found plenty of work to do. There tares and wheat, sheep and goats, saints and sinners, dwelt side by side, and lives were lived and deaths died that made angels smile or weep.

Although all the best rooms of the End House faced Langton Green, the front entrance was round the corner in Wentworth Street, and a rather small green door led to the surgery, where Dr. Cleveland kept his drugs and saw his poorer patients.

On the whole it was a commodious house; but in Lucia's eyes it had one great drawback—it had no garden,

only a dingy back yard was visible from Wentworth Street.

"There is not even space for a plant of mignonette," she would say ruefully to Eunice, for only empty hampers and a water-butt filled the yard. And Lucia, who had lived all her young life in a country Vicarage, and had awakened every summer morning for nineteen years to the scent of roses and lilies and all manner of sweet growing things, may be forgiven a petulant sigh at the thought of the unsightly water-butt. Lucia had two confidants—her husband and Eunice, but for two excellent reasons she talked more freely to Eunice. First, the doctor was a busy man, and was apt to flurry her and check her outpourings by bidding her look sharp and hurry up, or make some such masculine speech which took the wind out of her sails, and left her dumb and dejected; and secondly, Eunice was an excellent listener, and she was generally very sympathetic and interested in everything that concerned the household, though at times, being young, even she would occasionally turn restive, and if the day was fine, and the story long, there would be a hasty kiss, and "you shall tell me the rest presently, Lucia," and lo! Eunice had vanished.

Lucia always bemoaned herself on these occasions, and spent the remainder of the morning in low spirits; but to do her justice she never sulked or resented her snubbing, but being a weak-minded young woman she was always ready to take up the thread of her unfinished tale of woe on the first favourable opportunity, and as all comes to him who knows how to wait, Eunice would often reward her by displaying extra patience. Lucia had been a very pretty girl when Shirley Cleveland had gone down to Ashton Vicarage for "the wooing o't," with a complexion that could have vied with the lilies and roses in the sunny borders; and even now, after years of weak health and many children and many cares, she was still a sweet-looking woman,—indeed her husband privately thought that no other woman could be

found to compare with her within a radius of ten miles.

For the last year there had been a decided improvement in Mrs. Cleveland's health; she had left off some of her invalid ways, and had once more gathered up the reins of management into her own hands. Her husband would rub his with suppressed glee when he came in from his rounds and found her languidly dusting the china, or adding up the accounts at her little davenport; and he never failed to give her an encouraging word or two. But though Eunice shared his pleasure, she grew a little thoughtful, and more than once her sister-in-law found her brooding over the fire with rather a perplexed and careworn face.

Eunice and her brother were not in the least alike; he was fifteen years her senior, and regarded her in a somewhat paternal light, as though she were Daisy's sister, not his.

When people commented on this disparity, Eunice would tell them of the four brothers and sisters who died in early childhood,—victims to a terrible outbreak of diphtheria caused by defective drains.

Dr. Cleveland was a broad-shouldered, clumsily built man, who looked older than his thirty-eight years. He had married young, and for some years he and his household had almost entirely lived on the small capital, amounting to about eighteen hundred pounds, left to him by his father. Later on Lucia's modest little dowry was invested in this unlucky partnership, and then came frets and jars and all "the briars and thorns of this work-a-day world."

Dr. Cleveland was by no means handsome. His features were heavily moulded, but people who liked him said he had a kind face. Eunice, too, had no claims to beauty. She was just the ordinary type of a wholesome, healthy English girl, bright and pleasant-looking. One sees such faces by scores—in the Park riding in the Row, on tennis-grounds and golf-links, and one meets them on suburban roads—happy, fresh, young faces,

that look out cheerfully on life; products of no effete civilisation, whatever pessimists may say.

Eunice Cleveland was not without redeeming points in her favour. She had pretty, Irish-grey eyes, and dark curling lashes. Her hair was soft and abundant, and was arranged to the best advantage, and she had a neat, trim figure, and looked well-groomed, as her brother often remarked.

It was wonderful how Eunice managed her scanty allowance—the interest of a few hundreds left to her by an aunt; and how she contrived never to look shabby. Lucia would sigh sometimes, and wish she and Daisy had this gift.

"I do not know how it is, Eunice," she would say sometimes, "but your frocks never seem to wear out; that brown tweed, for example, to my knowledge you have worn it four winters, and it looks as good as ever," and so it did.

Eunice was no idler in her brother's household. She was housekeeper, nurse, governess, companion, and general factotum. She mended and made the children's clothes under Lucia's supervision. She took them out, and when she had time played with them. Then she was so strong, and never complained of being overworked, but sang blithely over her mending basket, and told Judy and Lot enchanting stories of her own composition, to which Lucia listened, and privately thought her sister-in-law a genius.

And then the invalid got better, and Eunice grew thoughtful and distrait, and brooded silently over the fire, while Lucia watched her with alarmed eyes.

Was she unhappy about anything? Had she fallen in love? or had she merely grown tired of her daily life, with its little pottering duties and worries? Lucia did not venture to question her. Eunice had never kept anything from her yet; they were sisters in heart and confidence; so she waited patiently. And then the blow fell, and Eunice broke silence. She began abruptly:

"Lucia was better, and could manage without her now. She was not absolutely necessary to her and the children. Shirley was in difficulties, and she could no longer burden him with her maintenance. She had made up her mind to earn her own living, and was already in treaty with a lady." This was the thunderbolt that broke over the Cleveland household, and divided a united family into two opposing factions.

Eunice had her work cut out for her, but her mind was made up, and she had plenty of courage. Before long she won Lucia over to her side. "It is not pleasant, dearest, but it is right," she said firmly; "and in your heart you agree with me; and now you must stand by and give me a helping hand while I tackle Shirley;" and then had ensued a lengthy argument, only cut short by infant baptism, and an erring Lot.

CHAPTER II

MISS DURNFORD LOOMS ON THE HORIZON

The characteristic of heroism is its persistency. All men have wandering impulses, fits and starts of generosity. But when you have chosen your part, abide by it, and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world.—EMERSON.

DR. CLEVELAND hauled down his colours in grim silence, and left the room. His masculine reason and conscience acknowledged that his sister was right, but in his heart and pride he was sorely wounded.

Eunice was proclaiming from the house-tops, with no uncertain voice, that he was a failure; that he found it so difficult to provide for his own household, that his young sisters, who was as a daughter to him, was compelled to leave his roof, and work for her daily bread.

"Of course the girl was right," he told himself irritably. If anything happened to him, there would be only the house, and about fifty pounds a year from the insurance office for Lucia and the children, and Daisy was only eleven. The thought of the uncertainty of life often gave him a cold shudder. He was strong and tough and hearty, thank God; but even strong men were sometimes stricken down in their prime, like that poor fellow Henderson, who was three years his junior, and who left a widow and five little children. He never could bear to think of that death-bed, and the harrowing scenes that ensued. Old Sandford had behaved well then. He knew all about the bank-notes slipped into the poor little widow's hand. To give him his due, the old fellow was always generous and open-handed.

It was only when he was tired and yet unable to sleep that these dark forebodings seized him, for he was too

healthy-minded to succumb tamely to that "deadly sin of accidie"—of which a divine has warned us—"that fatal mixture of gloom and sloth and irritation," which is a favourite snare of the evil one.

Dr. Cleveland wrestled like a brave man with the foul fiend that attacked him in his hours of weariness; nevertheless, the petition was frequently offered up that his life might be spared until his boys were educated and able to take their part in the battle of life; and who could doubt the earnestness of such prayers?

When Dr. Cleveland left the room his wife looked at Eunice rather pitifully. "Poor Shirley, he is very unhappy," she sighed; but Eunice made no answer, she only followed her brother into the hall and stood at his elbow, while he brushed his hat, and then took down his coat from the peg. She did not offer to assist him. Shirley did not always care to be waited upon, certainly not when he was in this mood; but she noticed with some regret that his coat-collar was slightly frayed, and must be rebound. "If he could only afford a new great-coat," she said sorrowfully to herself; "but with that coal bill, and those bad debts"—for a family had suddenly left the place without settling their doctor's account—"he has nothing to spend on himself."

"Have you a long round, Shirley?" she asked rather timidly, as he remained silent.

"Much as usual," was the curt answer, and then as he turned round in search of his gloves, their eyes met, and the next moment the girl's arms were round his neck.

"Dear Shirley, please—please do not look like that, or you will break your poor little sister's heart; kiss me and tell me you are not really hurt with me, I think I would rather die than hurt you, dear."

"Die! stuff, rubbish," muttered her brother crossly, for he was not a demonstrative man, and disliked scenes, and any exaggeration of speech. "Are you aware you are strangling me, you ridiculous child? Well, of all

the muscular young women——," and Dr. Cleveland readjusted his collar.

"Oh, but, Shirley dear——," and now there were unmistakable tears in Eunice's eyes, in another moment she would have burst out crying; then Dr. Cleveland's brusqueness vanished, and he patted her shoulder kindly, as he had patted Lot's.

"There, there, don't be a goose. Why, bless the child, I am not hurt,"—oh what a fib, Dr. Cleveland—"'not the least teeny, tiny bit,' as Judy says, only," here the broad shoulders stiffened a little, "a sudden douche of cold water in one's face is rather damping."

"Yes, of course; but you do not really disapprove, and think me horrid and ungrateful, dear?"

"Certainly not; what a persistent little woman it is," and then the brother's affection, prevailing over the natural man, who was still growling deep, inarticulate protests within, Dr. Cleveland put his hand under the girl's chin, and, with a forced smile, kissed her forehead in a fatherly fashion. "It is all right, make your mind easy, you are a plucky little girl, and God bless you," and then, as though alarmed at his own unusual effusiveness, he turned away hurriedly, and had opened and shut the street door before Eunice had recovered from her amazement.

That the stormy discussion should be followed by a valediction was a matter of some astonishment; but it was still more surprising and altogether wonderful to her to receive that caress; with the exception of perfunctory good-night and good-morning salutations, Shirley rarely kissed his own children. Even the fascinating little witch Judy, with all her seductive ways, had often to solicit a coveted kiss by lifting up her rosebud of a mouth with an appeal that could hardly be disregarded, and yet no father could be more devoted to his children. Eunice could have sworn that there were tears in her brother's eyes, at least a mistiness which betokened strong emotions; but she did not know how deeply the man's

whole nature was stirred by this sudden resolution on his sister's part.

"Poor little thing," he muttered as he crossed the Green, "the nest is not very softly lined, but anyhow it is warmer and safer than being out in the cold. She has not had much of a life here certainly, but Lucia and I have done our best for her, as we should for Daisy. Eh, oh!" with a prolonged sigh, "if one could only live in the good old times, when men worked and women sat at their spinning-wheels and embroidery frames, and made their own clothes, and cooked, and lived on next to nothing; and type-writers, and women-clerks, and girl-graduates were unknown."

Dr. Cleveland was in a contradictory mood that afternoon, for on other occasions he had expressed himself in a diametrically opposite fashion; and had held out for half an hour at a time on the improved condition of the nineteenth-century young lady.

"We must be unprejudiced," he would say, "and forgive them a certain freedom and boyishness of manner; they will tone down and soften by and by."

"Just consider the young lady as described in the pages of Miss Austen." The doctor was a profound student of Jane Austen's works. "Pretty helpless creatures in scanty skirts and sandals, afraid to venture into the fields and lanes for fear of cows and tramps and miry puddles; taking the air in terraced gardens, or in heavy, lumbering carriages, drawn by long-tailed Flemish horses."

"Do you remember Mrs. Hurst's and Miss Bingley's incredulous astonishment when that most charming of heroines, Elizabeth Bennet, 'walked three miles in such dirty weather and by herself' to see her sick sister, and that priggish Mary's observations on her conduct?" And here the doctor had his finger on the well-thumbed page, "Listen, Daisy, and you too, Eunice. 'I admire the activity of your benevolence,' says Mary, 'but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and in

my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required.' "

"I detest that tiresome idiot of a Mary," observed Daisy, who was rather put out at the length of her French exercise; but Eunice only laughed.

"Those two dears, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet!" she exclaimed enthusiastically, "do you know, Shirley, I always feel as though I really knew them. I wonder what they would have said to the modern girl, with her golf, hockey, and bicycle."

"Oh they would have been pretty well shocked," returned her brother; "but let me tell you, Eunice, things have considerably improved since then. Our women are less trammelled; when need requires they follow their brothers out into the world, and are bread-winners too. It stands to reason that a little of the delicacy and refinement is rubbed off sometimes; but on the whole, I think, we ought to be proud of them. There must be a spirit of sturdy independence and right-mindedness abroad, or our women workers would not be so much to the fore." And yet although Dr. Cleveland had delivered himself of this temperate and sensible harangue not many weeks previously, the mention of Eunice's plan had filled him with revolt and bitterness.

Eunice stood for a few minutes staring at the closed door, as though she had the power of seeing through it. "I do so wish I could have a good cry," she said to herself; "it would do me so much good, only it would upset Lucia. Lucia is so terribly emotional that she would cry too, and then Shirley would have another grievance. I really think," walking slowly down the passage, "that emotional people are terribly infectious, you can't be with them without catching something; when Lucia talks about her nerves, I always get pins and needles all over me, and want to jump about as though I had St. Vitus' Dance.

"Nerves are extremely catching," continued Eunice thoughtfully, "and it is one point in Miss Durnford's

favour that she does not know what the word means, it really is a set-off against her—we'll not mince the point—her want of breeding. What is the use of shutting my eyes to the fact that Miss Durnford is rather a common little person? But I don't care, I'm going on with it." And here Eunice gave herself a little shake, and went back to the sitting-room.

"Have you been with Shirley all this time?" asked Lucia in surprise, for the quarter of an hour had seemed long to her. "Oh, do sit down, Eunice, and talk comfortably over things; never mind fidgeting over Judy's frock, it will soon be dark, for the days are drawing in now."

"Then I may as well be idle," responded Eunice amiably; and she dropped into an easy-chair that stood invitingly by the couch.

"Luce, do you know Shirley has been such a dear! He kissed me and said nice things—at least they were nice for him; he is not really vexed, only so sorry that I think it necessary to take such a step. Well, that is over, thank Heaven," she continued piously. "I have dreaded this talk with Shirley for nearly a week; but it has been safely accomplished, and now I must write to Miss Durnford and make another appointment, for she told me she would like to see me again."

"Wait a moment, Eunice," implored Lucia; "dear me, how impetuous you are, and there is so much that I want to say. You are too fond of rushing things as Shirley remarks, and I am not at all sure that you are wise to take the first situation that offers. You know you told me yourself that Miss Durnford is not a gentlewoman."

"She is not what you and I would call one," returned Eunice truthfully; "she is certainly rather common and unrefined, but all the same I do not dislike her. She is good-natured and liberal; just think, Lucia, eighty pounds a year—and hardly any duties, except to be pleasant and companionable. Why, any one would jump

at such an offer; and then she is not pretentious or stuck up," went on the girl.

"Why, she told me at once about her father, and not a bit as though she were ashamed of it. He had a poky little shop in Norwich. He actually wore an apron and served behind the counter till he invented that soap—Durnford's soap, that every one uses,—and then he made his fortune, and shut up his shop, and sent his daughter to a finishing school in Brussels."

"And her father is dead, is he not?" asked her sister-in-law rather anxiously.

"Oh yes, he has been dead for years, and her mother is dead too; and as she has no brothers or sisters the poor thing is rather lonely. That is why she wants a companion, who will go about with her and sit with her in the evening."

"I don't think eighty pounds a year at all too much, if you have to put up with the society of a woman like that," returned Lucia in rather a horrified tone.

"Oh, she is not so bad as all that," observed Eunice, who was determined to look on the bright side. "She is a homely little body certainly, and occasionally, but not often misses an aspirate, and she has funny little ways. But I am sure she has taken to me, and wants me to come; and, after all, Lucia, it is better to put up with a little want of culture, than to be snubbed and slighted by some fine lady;" but Lucia would not endorse this.

"You have never described Miss Durnford to me properly," she said rather reproachfully.

"Oh, I am not good at description," returned Eunice mendaciously, for she rather prided herself on her graphic delineation of people whom she met; and would grasp their little oddities and idosyncrasies in quite a surprising way; but on the subject of Miss Durnford she preferred to hold her tongue.

Lucia was critical; and—well, it is not always wise to give utterance to one's thoughts, and sometimes first

impressions are at fault. She remembered the shock she experienced when she first caught sight of the homely little Dutch-built figure, with the untidy, sand-coloured fringe, who came bustling down the hotel corridor to meet her, and who greeted her with fussy kindness.

What would Lucia have thought of that unmodulated, high-pitched voice, and those curious little tricks and mannerisms, which, as her friends well knew, showed that the heiress was not at her ease?

She was so unconventional, too. Instead of beginning the interview in a business-like manner Miss Durnford merely remarked that it was luncheon time, and that she was hungry, and she supposed Miss Cleveland was hungry too; and before five minutes were over, and in spite of protestations to the contrary, Eunice found herself seated opposite this extraordinary person at a little table in a snug corner of the big dining-room, while an obsequious waiter plied her with good things. Eunice, who had a healthy girl's appetite, would have enjoyed her luncheon but for the fire of incessant questions that hardly allowed her time to eat. Miss Durnford was frankly inquisitive on all that concerned Eunice. Before luncheon was over she knew all the children's names, and was aware that one maid-servant and a boy —to attend to the surgery and clean boots and carry coal-scuttle—formed the modest establishment at the End House. Eunice's face burned with embarrassment at this exposure of their poverty; but Miss Durnford's manner grew more friendly as the meal progressed. Whatever Eunice might have felt, it was quite certain that her hostess was enjoying herself.

"There now, you have told me all I want to know," she observed as they rose from the table, and she led the way to the drawing-room, which was happily quite empty. "Now it is my turn; for if we are to live together we ought to know everything about each other, so we will start fair. I am not going to pretend I am a fine lady, who means to peacock over her companion"

—" good heavens, what an expression," thought Eunice, —" lor, bless you, my dear, when I was a child, father had a little shop in Market Place, Norwich, and served behind the counter, and mother, too, and I ain't ashamed to own it; all our neighbours down at Shepperton know all about me. It was all along of the soap—Durnford's soap and Durnford's blacking—that made our fortune. Don't I remember how frightened mother looked when money came rolling in like snowballs, and then father said he must shut up shop, and they must send me to that school at Brussels."

" Brussels, how nice!" murmured Eunice politely; but Miss Durnford shook her head and looked rather grave.

" It was not nice to me. I had no ear for languages, and the girls laughed at me for my queer pronunciation, though they were never tired of fingering my silk dresses. Well, I never was a worshipper of the golden image," continued Miss Durnford quaintly, " and there have been times when I have wished myself back in our shop in Market Place if only I could have seen mother shelling her peas, as she loved to do, in the little back parlour." And it was at this point of their conversation that Eunice felt that Miss Durnford improved on acquaintance.

So Eunice hardened herself against Lucia's curiosity; and her description was so bald, so altogether vague and inadequate that her sister-in-law was quite piqued.

" I don't seem to realise Miss Durnford a bit," she said rather crossly when Eunice had finished. " A short, podgy little person; about forty, you think, or a year or two younger; high coloured, with a funny little turned-up nose and blinking eyes."

" Oh, her eyes are quite pretty," broke in Eunice, rather shocked at this caricature. " They are bright blue, only she spoils them by a curious habit of screwing them up as though the light were too strong. Oh, she is not really bad looking, only she makes the very worst of herself. Just fancy, Lucia, her name is Jemima, and they used to call her Jem for short. I wonder if I

shall ever call her Jem?" and here Eunice broke into a little laugh that was not quite mirthful, but Lucia refused to join. Miss Durnford had got on her nerves; she hated the thought of her. When Lucia grew nervous she was invariably cross, and exceedingly dignified.

"I know my opinion has not been asked," she said stiffly; "but I owe it to my conscience to speak plainly. If you become Miss Durnford's companion you will certainly lose caste. What sort of friends do you suppose she asks to her house? A lot of rich, ill-bred people who drop their h's and talk about their little pile. You had better reconsider it, Eunice. We may be poor, but no one can say we are not gentle-people. Do write to Miss Durnford and refuse the place, and we will look out some more advertisements." But Eunice, who had made up her mind, was not to be coerced; and though Lucia worried herself into a headache and had to go to bed, a letter was written to Miss Durnford that very evening expressing her willingness to close with her terms.

CHAPTER III

"THEY CALLED ME JEM FOR SHORT"

Life is an opportunity for service.
—DR. WESTCOTT.

How each small fretting fretfulness,
Was but love's over-consciousness,
Which had not been had love been less.
—ANON.

WHEN Miss Durnford's reply reached Eunice she handed the letter silently to Lucia. Her sister-in-law would have been hurt if the note had not been offered for her inspection, for with all her amiability Lucia was a little *exigeante* at times. But Eunice knew well what her comment would be when she saw the sprawling, scratchy-looking writing.

"Good gracious, did any one ever see such writing?" she exclaimed. "It is big enough, but it is positively illegible. Perhaps," with mild sarcasm, "you will kindly tell me what hour she has appointed for the interview." Then Eunice smiled, but in reality she was puzzled herself.

"I think it is 3.30," she returned, "but I am not quite sure. But there is P.M. after it, so there will be no pheasant and hock for me to-morrow," and then Eunice carried off the offending letter to pore over it in private, and she finally gave up all attempts to decipher the hieroglyphics, and determined to take her chance. She arrived at the hotel as some neighbouring clock chimed the half-hour, and was informed that Miss Durnford had not returned from her drive, but was expected back shortly.

"I had better wait, then," observed Eunice; and then,

to her surprise, she was invited to take her place in the lift, and the next moment was whirled up several floors, and conducted to a small, cosy-looking sitting-room strewn with parcels and milliner's boxes. As every chair was occupied, Eunice ventured to clear one, and then sat down and looked curiously at the tempting packages.

"She must be rich," she thought. "What a lot of nice things;" for a feather-boa and sable muff and a driving coat with a fur collar were visible. "I suppose she has come up to town to do her winter shopping. Perhaps next autumn she will bring me, too. What fun that will be! I shall be able to get Christmas presents for Lucia and the children." And Eunice was so engrossed in delightful anticipation of this pleasure that she was quite startled when the door opened rather noisily and Miss Durnford entered.

"There now, I am ten minutes late," she exclaimed, but her good-natured face was beaming. "Madame Fayette kept me such a time. I declare I am tired to death with standing and having all these dresses fitted. Sit down, Miss Cleveland, and I will ring for some tea, for I am quite thirsty with talking. Bring up your chair to the fire," she continued kindly, "it is so raw and damp, it feels more like November than October. I do hate these foggy afternoons; I shall be glad to get back to Shepperton. London never agrees with me for long. I generally go home with a cold and an empty purse," and here Miss Durnford laughed heartily. "My old Susan will give me a rare scolding when she opens the parcels; and if there is any one I am afraid of, it is Susan."

When Miss Durnford laughed, which she did pretty frequently, being a merry little soul with a fund of kindly humour, she always opened her mouth rather widely, and displayed a set of white teeth that would have been the admiration of any dentist who took a pride in his profession, they were so even and faultless.

No, she was not so bad looking after all, Eunice thought, as Miss Durnford plumped herself down in the opposite chair, and wrestled with her tight gloves.

Up to a certain point she was well dressed, her coat and skirt had been evidently cut by a West-End tailor, and left nothing to be desired, but the whole effect was spoilt by an exceedingly smart hat, which was a blend of preposterous colours; but Miss Durnford, in blissful ignorance of this adverse criticism, wore the offending headgear in the most complacent manner. When Eunice knew her better she was often amused by her childish and transparent vanity, and her love of finery. "I am a regular peacock in my taste," she would say, "I am so fond of bright colours. Susan, who is a dissenter, and only likes drabs and browns, often warns me that dress, not money is the root of all evil; but there, she is such a one for inventing new proverbs."

"Well, now," began Miss Durnford briskly, when the gloves had been literally peeled off the plump fingers, "so you have made up your mind, like a good girl, to come back with me to Shepperton; that's what I like, no shilly-shallying and fuss. Why, the moment I set eyes on you on Wednesday I said to myself, 'Miss Cleveland will do; she looks sensible and good-humoured, and if I am not wrong she will suit me down to the ground, as sure as my name is Jemima Anne Durnford.'"

Eunice smiled; it was impossible not to respond cordially to this friendly speech. "I am so glad that you think I shall suit you," she returned. "As I told you I am anxious to be independent and help my brother." Then Miss Durnford nodded in an approving manner.

She was sitting bolt upright with her hands on her knees in a rather masculine fashion, and there was a sturdy, decided air about her that told Eunice very plainly that she knew her own mind as well as other people's, and was not the sort of person to put up with nonsense.

"Oh, that's all right," she observed hastily. "I think better of you for trying to help your people. Some

girls will take all they can get, and then turn up their nose at their relations; but they aren't my sort, I can tell you. Well, here comes tea and some hot buttered cake; put it down by the fire, James, and we will help ourselves. I call them all James," she remarked confidentially, as the man went out, "they all seem to answer to it; my, how I do hate menservants. I have got only women at the Dene. Of course there is the coachman and the gardener, but I am talking of the household. Now," leaning forward and tapping Eunice with the sugar-tongs, "don't you run away with the notion that because I have plenty of money I live in grand style, nothing of the kind. Father bought the Dene because the place suited him, and we thought it would be comfortable. We took the furniture too. Father said it would save a deal of trouble and oblige the family, for they were in such trouble, poor things.

"It was very góod and massive," went on Miss Durnford, warming to her subject, "but, as I told father, we could have bought new furniture for the price we gave for it, for the lawyer was a grasping old fellow. But all father said was this, 'You may be right, Jem,' they always called me Jem for short, 'it may be a trifle dear, but we are doing a good turn for the widow and the fatherless, and that dark oak in the dining-room has just taken my fancy.' Poor old father, he did not live long to enjoy it." Miss Durnford was growing slightly discursive, and it was necessary to recall her to business.

"I shall not be able to stay long," interposed Eunice apologetically, "the afternoon is inclined to be foggy, and my sister-in-law will be anxious. As you so kindly intend to give me a trial, I shall be glad to know how soon you will require my services?"

"How soon?" returned Miss Durnford without a moment's hesitation. "Why, directly, to-morrow if you like; let me see, it is Friday, shall we say Monday or Tuesday? Why, my good girl," as Eunice looked at

her in horrified amazement, "I can't stay here spending my money and running up hotel bills. I must go back to Shepperton on Tuesday afternoon, and you must come with me."

"But I have not got my things ready," faltered Eunice, with a vivid remembrance of Lucia's parting speech. "Don't you let her hurry you, you must put your clothes in decent order. I can lend you a trunk," but the rest of the sentence was lost, as Eunice could not wait to hear it.

Eunice's voice was rather plaintive, but Miss Durnford was inexorable. "Never mind your things," she said with kindly peremptoriness, "you will have plenty of time to settle them at the Dene; and if it is shopping you want I go into Shelgate most weeks, it is not London of course, but there are decent shops and a good dressmaker who works for most of the best people."

"Oh, I don't mean that," observed Eunice rather breathlessly. "I have no money to spend—only," and then she stopped in dire confusion. How could she explain to a stranger, to this rich fussy little person whose purchases strewed the room, that there was the evening blouse that Lucia had volunteered to finish for her, and some under-garments on which she herself was at present engaged? "I shall not be nice at all," she concluded rather lamely, while her cheeks burnt with embarrassment.

"You will be quite nice enough for me," returned Miss Durnford firmly. "We are quiet folk at the Dene, and do not always trouble about appearances. You just bring your things along with you, and Susan will give you a helping hand. The long and short of it is," she continued with unusual decision, "Susan says the General is peaky and off his food, and that Tommy and Baby refuse to have their usual airing."

"Tommy and Baby!" gasped Eunice. "I did not know you had children living with you, Miss Durnford!" Then the little woman laughed again in her merry fashion.

"Oh, I don't tell all my secrets, you see; but you shall be introduced to my family on Tuesday. Now look here. I am not going down to Shepperton without my companion, so you will just meet me at St. Pancras, and we will go down by the 12.15 train. And I will tell Compton—Compton is my cook—to have a good square meal ready for us." Miss Durnford spoke in a loud, jovial voice, but she blinked her eyes rather anxiously.

"I suppose I must come if you want me, but it is rather short notice——" began Eunice in a distressed tone. But Miss Durnford would not let her finish.

"There's a good girl," she said, patting her arm with kindly patronage. "I won't forget you are just putting yourself about to oblige me. I never do forget if people do me a good turn. Good-byes are best got over quickly; and I don't hold with long partings. When you have got to take physic, as Susan often says, it is better to drink it down and have done with it.

"You come up sharp to your time on Tuesday, and then you will see the children before they go to bed." And then again she laughed heartily, and shook hands with Eunice so cordially, and looked at her with such content and satisfaction that the girl could not have found it in her heart to disappoint her. But what would Lucia and Shirley say to this indecent haste? And this surmise occupied her entirely during the return journey.

Dr. Cleveland's words were few, but very much to the point. He washed his hands of the whole business. Eunice was her own mistress, and must settle her affairs for herself; but whether she expected it or not, he should certainly take her to St. Pancras on Tuesday, that Miss Durnford might see that in case of need she had to reckon with him, and that in spite of her independence he was still her lawful protector.

Dr. Cleveland's dry manner and tone of offended dignity so thinly disguised his brotherly anxiety, that Eunice

only said gratefully, "Dear Shirley, how kind;" and then she plucked up spirit and ran upstairs to break the unpalatable news to Lucia.

But as she entered the snug drawing-room her heart failed her. Lucia looked so dear and pretty; she was at work on the blouse, and held it up with a triumphant air to show Eunice the exquisite little tucks. Daisy, a long-legged, handsome child with a flowing mane of red hair, was stretched on the rug at her mother's feet, with her elbows comfortably propped up on a pile of lesson-books. She was droning over her French verbs in a monotonous, sing-song voice.

"How comfortable you and Daisy look," observed Eunice cheerfully; and then she admired the tucks and praised Lucia's skill and industry. "Will it take long to finish?" she asked in a careless tone, which did not betray her anxiety in the least.

Lucia fell into the trap at once.

"Oh dear, no," she returned complacently. "I shall have it done on Monday. It will be very pretty, Eunice. Pink always suits you, only the shade is rather delicate, and you must wear it carefully," and Lucia shook it out tenderly.

"Auntie will look just lovely in it," chimed in Daisy. "I should like my new blouse to be just the same, mummy, only blue instead of pink; that is the worst of having red hair," continued Daisy kicking rebelliously; "it ties you down to blue and green, when I like pink ever so much better."

"Go on with your lessons, Daisy," returned Eunice, "I want to talk to your mother about something important." And then she told her story, to which Lucia listened in total silence, while she put in her fine, fairy-like stitches; but Daisy's face grew longer and longer, and her large eyes were perfect saucers of woe.

"Oh, auntie, auntie—how dreadful!"

"Does Shirley know this?" asked Lucia in a judicial tone.

"Yes, dear fellow, and he means to go with me to St. Pancras."

"I am glad of that," in a cutting manner. "Miss Durnford will see that you have friends to back you up, and no one can be more dignified than Shirley when he chooses. I must say," laying down her work as her feelings became too much for her—"I must say I am surprised that you should have agreed to this preposterous arrangement. I should have thought that you would have had more consideration for us"—here Lucia's voice grew so plaintive, and she was so evidently wounded, that Daisy jumped up and gave her a bear-like hug, and Eunice knelt down beside her and put her arms round her in a coaxing fashion.

"Don't make things worse, dear," she pleaded; "they are quite bad enough, I can assure you; there, do get away, Daisy," as the red mane flapped caressingly against her shoulder, so that they became what Daisy called "a family heap,"—"children should be seen, not heard; how often have I told you that?"

"But I don't like mummy to be unhappy, and we don't want to lose our little auntie," returned Daisy in an aggressively affectionate manner. "I hate that nasty Miss Durnford—that I do, and I hate my French verbs worse," throwing the offending book into the fender, where it nearly met with an untimely end.

"Hush, don't be silly, Daisy," observed Lucia roused by this childishness. "I am sure I am quite worried enough, and you are too old to play these childish pranks;" then Daisy relapsed into sulky silence, and Eunice recommenced her difficult task of soothing Lucia's perturbed nerves.

She succeeded after a time. Perhaps the very exigence of the case helped to bring a reaction in her favour; for though Lucia cried a little, and said she would miss Eunice every hour of the day, and that the poor children would be sadly neglected, she finally cheered up and was soon her practical self again. Later that evening,

when Dr. Cleveland had been called out to a patient and they were alone, Lucia grew quite cheerful as they discussed the contents of Eunice's modest wardrobe, and contrived ways and means of procuring the few articles which she declared were absolutely necessary.

Before they went to bed that night Eunice mentioned Miss Durnford's perplexing allusion to the children—"The General, Tommy, and Baby."

"Do you know, Lucia, I have an idea she has got a cripple's home or something of the kind in which she takes an interest."

"I don't believe it for a moment," replied her sister-in-law, who was very quick and shrewd in her surmises. "It is a family of cats or dogs or parrots—very probably Persian cats—for, as far as I can make out, Miss Durnford seems rather an old-maidish, eccentric little person. You may depend on it, Eunice, that part of your duties will be combing and brushing the children, and taking them for an airing."

"I don't agree with you," returned Eunice. "I believe they belong to Susan's department." And then her eyes twinkled naughtily, and she added in a mischievous voice, "I should not be surprised after all, Lucia, if, in a very short time, I were to call Miss Durnford 'Jem.'"

CHAPTER IV

EUNICE ENACTS THE PART OF GREATHEART

Familiar acts are beautiful through love.
—SHELLEY.

Freely we serve, freely we serve
Because we freely love.
—MILTON.

THE next day but one was Sunday and when Eunice woke on that morning she determined to make the most of every hour and to garner up a whole store of honey-sweet recollections on which she could feast in her exile. But before she went to rest that night she felt as though she had lived through a month of Sundays, the day had seemed so endless.

To regulate time by one's inward emotion would put all well-conducted clocks to dire confusion. One might as well try to count each separate heart-beat. And Eunice's futile attempts to look cheerful and talk to the children in her usual happy fashion were so pathetic and altogether heart-breaking in Lucia's eyes, that only the fear of her husband kept her from complete collapse.

As a rule Sunday was the pleasantest day in the seven to the elder members of the household. True, it was not often that the hard-worked doctor could accompany his family to church; but there were few Sunday afternoons when he could not snatch an hour—after the early dinner or before the family tea—to enjoy the society of his wife and family, and this day there was no exception to the usual routine.

Eunice sat beside her brother, and Judy and Lot were on their father's knees. Lot's name was in reality Leonard, but in his baby days he had invented this abbre-

viation, and the childish name had stuck to him. Daisy and the three boys—Frank, Cecil, and Jock—were seated on the rug. Frank was the nearest to his mother, and from time to time she stroked the dark-cropped head very tenderly. They were all sturdy, rosy-cheeked boys, with a fund of animal spirits which was somewhat overpowering at times; but on Sunday afternoon, and under their father's eye, they were on their best behaviour.

Dr. Cleveland was rather a strict disciplinarian with his sons. He rarely punished, and never without due occasion. But even the tough hide of boyhood is not proof against sarcasm, and Dr. Cleveland sometimes whetted his tongue at his boys' expense.

"Don't play the fool, Frank," or "Don't be such a goat, Cecil," would check their monkey tricks in a moment. Lucia once privately confided to Eunice her maternal fears that Shirley was rather too hard on Frank.

"He is the cleverest of all the boys," she said; "and his masters are always commending him and giving him prizes, and asking him to tea, and yet Shirley is perpetually finding fault with him."

"Never mind! he is quite as proud of him as you are," returned Eunice, "and a little taking down won't do Master Frank any harm."

Eunice, who had no illusions about her nephews, and who could never be made to own that they were so superior to other people's boys, quite understood her brother's view of the case. Frank, who was unusually clever for his age, was inclined to be cheeky, and to think too much of himself; and Shirley, who was determined that his eldest boy should not turn out a prig, lost no opportunity of administering a well-merited snub or two.

"He is such a cocky little beggar," he would say, "and lords it over Cecil and Jock in such a masterful way. Why, he would argue with me if he dared, and the rogue only just turned ten. Did ever one see such a little ape?" Nevertheless Eunice well knew that the

much-snubbed Frank was the very apple of his father's eye.

They were all good little lads, and Daisy, who doated on her brothers, bore all their teasing and nicknames with the utmost good humour. She was not old enough yet to regret her red hair, though she quite believed Frank when he dubbed her Carrots, and condoled with her on its hideous colour. "It looks like tongues of fire," he would say; "one could warm one's hands at it. When you are grown up they will call you the Scarlet Lady."

"I don't care," returned Daisy recklessly, but she did care all the same. "Father likes it; don't you, Dad?" Then Dr. Cleveland, who privately admired the tawny mane, assured her that many girls would envy her.

Lot was confiding a private grievance to his father in a loud, sibilant whisper, while Judy wagged her head at him and contradicted every word. Dr. Cleveland, who was growing drowsy with the warmth and continuous hum of voices, grew slightly bewildered.

"I don't quite understand, my little man," he said at last, "why should you not play games if you like?"

"But Lot is welly tired of Bible games," returns the little fellow in his solemn way; "don't peak, Judy, farder is listening so hard that his eyes are shutted."

"When Daddy shuts his eyes when I am talking," returned Judy defiantly, "I always say Bo in his ear," and Judy so promptly acted on her reminder that Dr. Cleveland roused up and rubbed his ear ruefully. "Don't, Judy, you tickle me," then Judy flung herself back in paroxysms of laughter, but Lot who was slow to see a joke, looked anxiously at his father.

"Did it hurt?" he asked sympathetically. "Judy is a welly rude girlie." Lot always introduced a final ie if possible, at the end of his nouns, "once she bited Lot's ear—like a doggie."

"Come, let us hear about the games," observed his father, with forced briskness, "and, Judy, don't inter-

rupt," but he might as well have spoken to the wind. The story was long, and Lot was terribly slow,—he had a difficulty in explaining his meaning, and whenever he halted or came to a full stop, he always took his father by the chin as though he were an infant barber, and was looking round for shaving soap; at such moments Judy rushed in and took up his parable.

Every Sunday evening they played Bible games, and now Lot had struck and objected to the part assigned to him.

He did not mind, so Judy explained, being the lions in "Daniel in the Lions' den," because he liked roaring; and he thought Joseph in the pit, fun, because he always cuddled the kitten under his coat of many colours, but when they played at the burning fiery furnace, he was a naughty boy, and always wanted to be the band.

"The band—what band?" asked Dr. Cleveland, who was on the verge of a nap; then Judy, who had a temper of her own, gave him a little shake.

"Oh, Daddy, how can you be so silly? Why sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of musics, to be sure; and as I am bigger than Lot, I can play the drum and the Jew's-harp ever so much better, but Lot is so naughty, that he only stamps if I ask him to be Abednegro, and the other gentlemen."

"Lot hates Bedeclothes," chimed in Lot rebelliously, "won't have nothing to do with mannies," and the tea bell rang, and Dr. Cleveland had quite a long nap before Eunice settled this little difference by proposing a new and charming game from the *Pilgrim's Progress.*

It was a wet evening, and no one could go to church, for in such a downpour, they would be soaked in only crossing the Green. On any other occasion Eunice would have gone alone, for she never stayed at home whatever the weather might be; but if she went Daisy and Frank would insist on accompanying her. It ended by the whole party trooping up after her to the nursery to watch two little pilgrims starting for the Celestial

City, a roguish looking Faithful, and a solemn-faced Christian staggering under his brother's well-filled satchel. Eunice, who was Greatheart, performed her part with precision and dignity. She had played the game in her childish days with some of the little brothers and sisters who had died. She remembered the old garden at Brentford, and a certain porch quite smothered in jasmine which they always called the Palace Beautiful, and of a dear little winsome face that was framed in it. She remembered quite vividly how Watchful the porter rung a bell, and a tiny Discretion answered it. Darling little Cicely, she could hear her voice now. "What does 'oo want, 'oo poor man?"—dear, dear, how sweet those childish days were, and now her little playmates were all safe in the Celestial City, and only she and Shirley were left to toil up the Hill Difficulty, and to tread the long weary road of life.

Eunice could have wept salt tears as she played the old game. She was glad when Lot's and Judy's bedtime came, but here new duties presented themselves. Both the children protested that no one but their little auntie should undress them, and even when she had tucked them up with many kisses, Judy held her hand, and demanded hymns. "We shan't have no little auntie next Sunday night," observed Judy pathetically; and Lot, who was half asleep, murmured in unison, "no auntie, and no old clothes man to go knocking, knocking at garden gates," which was rather a perversion of the allegory.

When both children were fast asleep, Eunice was hurrying downstairs, when she heard a shrill whistle from the room where the boys slept.

"We were waiting until you had finished with the kids," observed Frank cheerfully, thumping his pillow. "We are all precious wide-awake to-night, at least Cecil and I are, and Jock don't matter, he is like the fat boy in *Pickwick,* he is always falling asleep. Daisy is coming in, and we are going to have a palaver; why it is your last Sunday evening," in an injured voice, as Eunice

made some feeble protest, "sit down on my bed, never mind the other fellows." And Eunice was pulled down and held a prisoner.

"I'm ready," shrieked Daisy, suddenly appearing in a scarlet dressing-gown, and her wonderful mane flowing over her shoulders; "bother, if it wasn't Sunday, and auntie wasn't going away I would practise my dancing steps, I feel so jumpy to-night." Then as Eunice looked shocked at this, Daisy fell upon her bodily as though she were a youthful boa-constrictor and was bent on strangulation, after which the whole quartette huddled in or upon Frank's bed, and the palaver began.

Eunice was almost worn out, when at last she released herself, and insisted on Daisy going to her own room; how she longed for bed and solitude, but she must go down and bid Lucia good-night.

To her surprise she found Shirley with her. They were sitting on the great Chesterfield couch, drawn up snugly to the fire, and as Eunice entered they both looked up with a smile and made room for her between them.

"What an age you have been," observed Lucia good-humouredly. "Those tiresome children have kept you, I expect. I was certain I heard Daisy capering overhead."

"I was just coming up to read the Riot Act," added Dr. Cleveland lazily. "Well, Eunice, when shall we three meet again I wonder, not before Christmas, I expect?"

"Oh, dear," in rather a doleful voice, for Eunice's fatigue made her somewhat desponding, "I do hope Miss Durnford will let me spend Christmas at home. If she would only give me two days I should be content."

"I should not trouble about that yet," returned her brother sensibly. "Look here, Eunice, Luce and I have been talking, and we want you to make us a promise."

"You must tell me what it is first," replied Eunice doubtfully. "I never make promises blindfold."

"Well, I was going to tell you if you would not inter-

rupt me in that unmannerly way," in a testy voice. Then he relented at the sight of Eunice's tired face.

"We want you to be perfectly frank and aboveboard with us, and not keep things from us. If you are happy with this good lady we shall be quite content for you to remain with her; but if you find your life at Shepperton too trying, and you are homesick and miserable, promise me not to hide it from us, but to come back to us, and remember that this will always be your home."

"Oh, Shirley, how sweet of you," and for the moment Eunice could say no more; she only squeezed his hand hard. But Dr. Cleveland would not let her off.

"Come now, I want that promise," with pretended gruffness; "honour bright, you know."

"Oh, I think I can promise you and Lucia that," she returned gratefully. "Of course, I mean to make the best of things; and I shall hope to be happy and comfortable when the strangeness has worn off a little. But if I find I have made a mistake and I am too miserable to stay, I will come back to my place in the nest, even though I shall have to try my wings again in a second flight."

"Very well; mind you stick to your word." But Dr. Cleveland was inwardly relieved by this concession. Eunice could be a bit obstinate when she liked.

"You must make me a promise too," went on Eunice, after a long pause, during which she was asking herself whether any other girl had such a brother. "I want you to see that Lucia does not overwork herself. You know, Shirley," laying her hand on his wrist, "that she has been so used to my help all these years. I have done so many little things for her and the children that I fear she will miss me terribly. If only Daisy were older——"

But here Lucia struck in hastily. "Don't mind her, Shirley. I am not an invalid now, and if I take care there will be no fear of my overworking myself. I mean to leave things, and not be so particular; and

Judy is such a handy little creature. She is quite a help to me now—putting away her own toys and Lot's, and keeping the nursery tidy, but Daisy is still such a tomboy. Oh yes, dear," in a cheerful tone of conviction, for Lucia was always brave unless her nerves were unstrung, "you need not trouble about me. Shirley and I will look after each other, won't we, dear old boy?" and Lucia's wifely glance was good to see.

So that night Eunice went to her bed comforted, and slept the sleep of honest weariness, and the next day she was too busy to have time to indulge in forebodings. First, she had her shopping to do, to buy the gloves, veil, and boots that Lucia had declared were absolutely necessary, and that were to be procured with Shirley's money,—Eunice's small quarterly allowance being nearly exhausted. Then there was some mending to do—to make old clothes look like new, and to put the finishing touch to a garment she was making; and finally, when all was done, to pack the handsome trunk that was one of Lucia's belongings. And as it was supper time before this was accomplished, the two women were so weary with their labours that Dr. Cleveland sternly insisted on their going to bed directly the meal was over.

"And no talking to-night, Lucia," he observed, looking up from his paper. "If you don't want Eunice to lie awake for hours you will just let her go upstairs alone." For Dr. Cleveland knew women well, and he was quite aware that Eunice was in that state of mental tension and bodily fatigue that even a few sympathetic words would be likely to upset her.

"Very well, Shirley," returned his wife obediently. "I will come to your room the first thing after breakfast, Eunice, and then we can finish the rest of the packing." And Eunice nodded gratefully and withdrew.

"Shirley is so wise," thought the girl as she climbed the stairs rather wearily. She slept in a little room opening out of the night nursery where Judy and Lot had their cots. "Dear Lucia! I am afraid she is dis-

appointed, but if she had come to my room to-night we should have just upset each other; for when one is utterly tired out one does feel so miserable, and then there is no good in trying to hide it." And Eunice caught her breath with a little sob as she passed the sleeping children and took refuge in her room.

CHAPTER V

AN UNCONSCIOUS EGOTIST

Not as little as we dare, but as much as we can.
—BISHOP WESTCOTT.

There is not a thought or feeling, not an act of beauty or nobility, whereof man is capable, but can find complete expression in the simplest, most ordinary life.—MAETERLINCK.

DR. CLEVELAND took matters into his own hands the following morning, and, thanks to his masculine firmness and energy, the leavetakings were cut surprising short, and, with the exception of Judy and Lot, there were no tears shed.

Judy, indeed, wept copiously, for she was a tender-hearted child and rather prone to cry when her feelings were touched; and Lot, who always followed her lead, roared like a small bull of Bashan.

Daisy had been obliged to hurry off to school with her brothers directly after the early breakfast, and the quartette had hugged Eunice with great fierceness when they had bolted their last wedge of bread and butter. Indeed, it must be confessed that Jock's voice was husky with crumbs and not with sobs as he raced back for a parting squeeze. Eunice stood at the door as the children, shouldering their school-satchels, scampered down Wentworth Street, Daisy's long legs and brown Tam-o'-Shanter as usual leading the van, while the October sunshine lighted up her tawny mane.

"I think Daisy will be a beauty one of these days," observed Eunice to her sister-in-law. "She has such good features, and such a nice complexion, and then that glorious hair." And Lucia, who was very sensitive

on the subject of her children's looks, smiled, well pleased.

Eunice looked back very wistfully as the cab drove off. Lucia was waving to her from the doorway, while Lot and Judy howled afresh in unison. Lucia's shabby dress and sweet wan face, pale from sleeplessness and repressed feeling, stood out in strong relief in the sunlight. She kept up bravely, and until the cab turned the corner the smile was still on her lips, but as she closed the door she shivered as though she were cold. As for Lot and Judy they played funerals all day with the utmost solemnity and perseverance. The kitten was carried scratching and mewing to his last home in the Noah's ark, and similar obsequies were held over a lively canary, who twittered and chirped in the most frivolous way, while Lot made gruesome allusions to "dustie dust."

"It is our nicest churchiest game," he observed, when his mother grew weary of the unceasing tolling of a handbell which quite grated on her nerves.

"Do let us play it, mummie," coaxed Judy; "it is just a nice miserable game for to-day, and to-morrow we will have weddings, and Lot's elephant shall marry my giraffe." And for the sake of peace Lucia weakly gave in.

Eunice was glad to find that they were the first to arrive at the station; but as her brother was taking her ticket she caught sight of Miss Durnford following a truck of piled-up luggage, and pointed her out to him.

"Humph, so that is Miss Durnford," he responded rather drily, and Eunice grew a shade nervous as she saw how keenly he watched the bustling ungraceful movements of the little square-built figure.

Miss Durnford had had an altercation with the cabman, and looked heated and flurried. She considered he had used the whip too freely, and had in consequence refused to pay him sixpence over the fare, unless he

promised to amend his ways for the future. "In that case I will make it a shilling," she had continued, and the cabman, with a wink at the porter, had made hoarse protestations of his good intentions.

"No one can say I ain't a feeling man, can they, Jo?" in a solemn appeal to the grinning porter. "An old 'orse is apt to go to sleep unless you tickle him up a bit; lor' bless you, Lidy, Bob and me understand each other's little ways." And then Miss Durnford handed the coveted shilling and a tract to the cabman and bustled after her luggage.

Miss Durnford always gave tracts to cabmen; she kept a special one for this purpose—"Shoeing the Mare" it was called, and it had been published by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; this was Miss Durnford's pet society, and she subscribed handsomely to it.

When people tried to dissuade her from the tract-giving, she always argued that cabmen had so much leisure for reading.

"A word in season may do so much, my dear," she would say. "I always hold with that beautiful text of Solomon's, 'Cast thy bread upon the waters,' so I just scatter my crumbs where I get a chance." And to do them justice she seldom got a rude word, for when cabby is well paid he is rather a pleasant fellow.

When Miss Durnford joined them Eunice saw at once that she was nervous too, and as she always betrayed her embarrassment by talking loudly and blinking her eyes, Eunice was secretly afraid that Shirley's judgment would be unfavourable.

"So you are first, Miss Cleveland," she observed abruptly. "Well now, I call that good of you; and I suppose this gentleman is your brother, though he is not a bit like you." Then Dr. Cleveland lifted his hat and tried his best to look pleasant.

"I thought I should like to put my sister under your charge, Miss Durnford, as she has never been away

from us before. We are a bit fussy, you see." Then Miss Durnford's face cleared, and she gave him a friendly nod.

"Come now, I call that nice, that I do," she said heartily "You are a lucky girl, Miss Cleveland, to have a good brother to look after you and take proper care of you. Dear, dear, the nights I've cried myself to sleep as a child because I wanted a real brother all to myself. Children are queer creatures, are they not, doctor?" Then Dr. Cleveland's rugged face was lighted up by a genial smile.

"Mine are," he returned; "our nursery pair say and do the drollest things. Now, ladies, I think it is time for you to take your seats." And then he established them comfortably in the first-class compartment.

"You don't intend to starve either mind or body, I see," he observed with a twinkle of amusement, as he handed in the heavy luncheon-basket, and a perfect pile of picture papers and magazines.

"Lor' bless you, I should hope not," replied Miss Durnford briskly, "a starved body makes a bad temper, as my old Susan often says. I ain't one to hold with making folks uncomfortable, and your sister will tell you so when she has been at the Dene a few weeks. I remember," continued the little lady garrulously, "that we had a curate at our church once, who was always preaching on abstinence and mortification of the flesh. But I told him to his face that I did not hold with such Romish doctrine, that I liked my three square meals in the day, and always felt the better for them, and that I thanked God for good meat and drink every day of my life. But bless you, he only shrugged up his shoulders and turned down the corners of his mouth in a sour kind of way as though I somehow disagreed with him, and when he preached about Dives the next Sunday I knew he was meaning it for me."

Dr. Cleveland threw back his head with an amused laugh. Then as the guard signalled, he kissed his sister

hastily, and shook hands with her companion in a friendly manner that somewhat comforted Eunice.

She would have been still more relieved if she had listened to his description of Miss Durnford to Lucia.

"Well she is a homely little body," he observed, "but somehow I rather liked her. She is genuine, and that goes for something in this world. I am not saying that I admire her style, mind you. I like a little more repose of manner and less action; but she is good-natured, and she has taken a fancy to Eunice, it was plain enough to see that."

"Well now, I think I should get on with your brother," began Miss Durnford cheerfully, as the train steamed out of the station. "Just at first he made me a bit shy, he looked so sharp at me, as though he wanted to turn me inside out; but when he laughed he was downright nice, though he ain't what you call handsome. I have always had rather a liking for good-looking men," she went on composedly as she unstrapped a travelling wrap. "My father was a fine looking man, though I am such a plain body myself. I suppose that is why I doat on handsome faces. Mother used to say, 'Handsome is as handsome does,' just to hearten me up a bit. 'If you are a good girl, Jem, no one will trouble because you have not a pretty face,' she would add. But there, I was such a goose in those days, that I would cry my eyes out when those girls at Madame Louvet's laughed at my wide mouth and called me Froggie."

"They were very rude," returned Eunice indignantly. "I am sure you were not in the least like a frog, Miss Durnford, they have such bulging-out eyes." Then the little woman laughed merrily.

"Lor' bless you, my dear, it was just their spite because I had three silk dresses in my trunk, and a real sealskin jacket that had cost father thirty guineas at least, and some of them were as poor as church mice. There was Hortense Leray, who was the worst of all, and encouraged the little ones in their mean tricks, her father was

at court, and was quite a big swell; but Fräulein told me that no one guessed how hard they found it to live in that big barrack of a place and keep up appearances. But no one in the Pension was good enough for Hortense; dear, oh dear, how she peacocked it over the other girls!"

"Did she?" observed Eunice with a faint smile, for her thoughts would stray to Lucia and the End House.

"If she had been a giraffe she couldn't have held her head higher," continued Miss Durnford in a tone of enjoyment, which showed how much she was engrossed in the reminiscence. "I pretty nearly hated her for her insolence and spiteful ways, until little Fanchette upset a cup of coffee over her best dress; it was just before the prize-giving, and when I saw the poor thing looking ready to cry over the stained front, and knew that she had nothing decent to wear, and that she could not ask her mother for another new frock, I was that soft that I made up my mind to get her one myself."

"Oh, how good of you, Miss Durnford!"

"Good—tut, tut—what are we sent into the world for, I should like to know, if it is not to help each other; and I was never one, with all my faults, to bear malice. My purse was full just then, and I should only have spent my money in treating the girls to ices and pastry at the confectioner's, and surfeited them and myself with chocolate creams and nougat. So I took Fräulein into my confidence—she was my only friend at that time,—and we just bought the loveliest material—I forget what they called it, a soft cloudy pink, with little silk spots, and some pretty lace for the trimming, and a pair of long gloves, and a sash. Oh, I did it handsomely, I can tell you, and then we put the parcel on her bed, with a pencilled card 'with Jem's love,' and didn't I feel ready to dance with happiness!"

"And what did Hortense Leray say?" asked Eunice quite eagerly, for there was no doubt of her attention now.

"Why, my dear, she just blubbered like a big baby,

and it made the rest of us cry to see her trying to thank me, with the tears rolling down her face and pretty nearly choking her. She came and sat on my bed that night after Fräulein had been her rounds, and opened her heart to me a bit. She told me it drove her quite wild with envy to see all my nice things; that though they were noble, they had hard work to keep up appearances; she let out, too, that Madame Leray was very strict, and she and her sister Annette dare not ask her for things; and then she begged me to forgive her—she was to make her confession at St. Gudule's in the morning, and she could not sleep until she had spoken to me. Oh, she had a heart, that Hortense!" went on Miss Durnford; "and if she had only stayed at the Pension my life would have been easier, for after that she would not let the girls tease me; but her father died, and the family went to Liège, and then somehow things got worse than ever, and I began to fret myself ill, and then mother came and fetched me away."

Eunice had been greatly interested by this recital, but her knowledge of the world was too elementary at present for her to realise how self-revealing Miss Durnford's simple egotism was; she only thought how fond she was of talking, and how strange it seemed to be so frank and unrestrained with a comparative stranger, and what a kind little person she must be.

A close observer would have diagnosed Miss Durnford's characteristics at once: she was an unconscious egotist, and also an unselfish one, which is perhaps stating a paradox; but in reality she was not in the least addicted to self-praise or glorification, though she saw no need of hustling her cheerful personality into the background.

"Dear me, how nice it is to have some one to talk to!" she observed after a five minutes' interval of silence; "it gives me quite a pleasant, homely feeling. Susan is a rare talker when she is in the humour, but she has her prejudices, and sometimes turns crusty when I don't agree with her—but there, we all have our little tempers.

Now I am going to open the luncheon-basket, for travelling always makes me as hungry as a hunter." But all the time they were feeding on delicacies from Fortnum and Mason's, Miss Durnford chatted on in her lively, discursive way.

Eunice had no idea for a long time that her companion was talking chiefly for her benefit, until, just as they were changing trains at Shelgate Station, and Miss Durnford's mountain of luggage was safely in the van, that lady observed rather breathlessly, "There now, we shall have no more changes until we reach Disborough, and Shepperton is not more than a mile out. Disborough is our city, and Shepperton is our west end, though it is only country, of course. Well now, Miss Cleveland, you are feeling all the better for my chatter, aren't you?" a little anxiously. "It is ever so much better than moping over what can't be helped must be endured, and that sort of thing.

"Dear me," before Eunice could gratefully acknowledge the truth of this. "That reminds me of one of Susan's funny speeches, when I was rather out of sorts and worried about something.

"'When young folks are out of temper, Miss Jem,' she observed—Susan always calls me Miss Jem, because she was my nurse in the old Norwich days,—'their elders and betters are fond of pointing out the little black dog on their shoulders; but it seems to me that worry is just like a grey tabby that has lost her kittens, and keeps one on the fidget with her mewing and crying.' Dear, how mother did laugh when I told her this; and Susan's saying was quite a proverb in the house, and the grey tabby was always a word with us for any household worry."

"I think your maid Susan must be quite a character, Miss Durnford."

"Oh, she's that—and she is a perfect treasure to me; but you must not expect her to take to you at once. She will be a little cool and standoffish at first; but

she is a good soul, and she will come round if you only give her time."

"Perhaps she is not quite pleased at the idea of your having a companion," suggested Eunice, and Miss Durnford grew so red that the girl at once guessed that she had hit the right nail on the head.

"Well now, to think you are as sharp as that," returned Miss Durnford in an embarrassed tone, "and you have not even seen Susan; but I am not going to deny you are speaking gospel truth. Have I not just told you that she has her prejudices, and one is that she does not hold with young ladies.

"The fact is, I have spoilt Sue, and given way too much to her. Why, she was arguing for pretty nearly an hour on this very subject.

"'What do you want with a companion, Miss Jem?' she said quite crossly. 'There is Mrs. Compton, and Rachel, and Dorcas, and the other girl, not to count Sallie the kitchen-maid,—women enough for one house,' for she had not yet forgotten the grievance of Dorcas having a girl under her, to help with the housework. Indeed, she was so stiff and opinionated that I lost patience at last, and told her to mind her own business and I would attend to mine, and that brought her to her senses, silly old thing. But there—why, we are actually at Disborough, and there is Andrew waiting to help with the luggage—he is under-gardener, and such a good fellow as never was," and Miss Durnford nodded in friendly fashion to a strapping young fellow, with red hair and a Glengarry bonnet, who was waiting on the platform.

CHAPTER VI

THE DENE AND ITS MISTRESS

Variety's the very spice of life,
That gives it all its pleasure.
—COWPER.

Where sits our sulky sullen dame,
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.
—BURNS.

A NEAT-LOOKING brougham with a pair of bay horses was evidently awaiting them; but before Miss Durnford stepped into the carriage she held quite a long conversation with the coachman, and when she rejoined Eunice there was a pucker of anxiety on her good-natured face.

"Dear me, isn't that aggravating!" she exclaimed; "there's Compton's afraid the old pony is going lame again! He can't be sure of it, because Dick is the laziest old rascal and can sham finely. Good gracious, if there isn't Douglas Hilton crossing the road—he is the very person to help me," and Miss Durnford tugged at the check string, and tapped so smartly on the window, that Compton pulled up his horses, and the young man stopped and looked around, and in another moment he was beside them.

He was the tallest man that Eunice had ever seen. She found out afterwards that he stood six feet five inches in his stockings, and being strongly built and somewhat massive, he looked like a young giant. He was a good-looking fellow, though his face was a little solemn and heavy in repose; it was smooth and per-

fectly free from hirsute ornament, and his rusty-brown hair was cropped very closely to his head.

He wore a brown tweed shooting-coat and gaiters, and was followed by a handsome black collie, who wagged his tail in evident pleasure when Miss Durnford called him "good old Nigger."

"Well now, I am in luck's way as usual," she observed cheerily; "if you ain't the very person I want. Jump in, there's a good fellow. What do you say? You haven't half an hour to spare! Why, there's Dick either lame or shamming, and I want your opinion ever so."

"I will look in to-morrow and see him, Miss Durnford," returned the young man. His voice was pleasant, and had an unmistakable tone of culture. "I am so sorry I have not a moment to spare. Lilian is up at Chez-Nous, and I have promised to fetch her. I was just going to the Dragon for the dog-cart, and I am late now."

"My word! Lilian and Araby seem thick as thieves," returned Miss Durnford in rather a meaning tone; but Mr. Hilton was glancing at Eunice somewhat curiously, and did not answer. He was wondering who she was, and where Jem Durnford had picked her up. There had been no introduction. Miss Durnford often omitted these little courtesies, unless some one reminded her.

"Well, come to-morrow, then, as early as you can," she continued hastily. "Give my love to Lilian, and tell her she must look us up soon. Drive on, Compton," and the next moment the bays were rattling down the road in fine style.

"Who was that?" asked Eunice, as the young man lifted his cap and walked off. "He looks like a soldier."

"So people often say. Isn't he a fine set-up young fellow, Miss Cleveland! But he is a farmer is Douglas, and not an army man. He has a nice place of his own over at Medfield, three or four miles from here. It belonged to his father and his grandfather before him —the 'Friars' Farm' as they used to call it."

"What a curious name!" observed Eunice, who was seldom able to put in a word.

"Oh, I believe it once belonged to a monastery in the good old time. There is a big pond in the garden, where they used to keep carp. But the young people have changed the name to Monkbarn; but as long as old Mr. Hilton lived, it was just Friars' Farm."

"Is the mother dead too?"

"Oh dear, yes. She died about two years ago, and Lilian has not long put off mourning for her. She was a nice creature, and I quite loved her, for she was my first friend when we came to the Dene. The young people are both favourites of mine, and I see them most weeks when they come into Disborough. Lilian is a downright sensible girl, and makes the best little housekeeper possible; and as for Douglas, big as he is, he is worth his weight in gold."

Miss Durnford spoke with such warmth and enthusiasm that Eunice would have questioned her further; only her attention was distracted just then by the sight of the grey minster, and its picturesque old gateway between quaintly clipped box. It looked so still and peaceful against the background of ruddy sunset clouds, with its broad flagged path, and a few grey old buildings round it, that Eunice uttered an exclamation of admiration.

"Oh, how beautiful, Miss Durnford!" in quite an awe-struck voice.

"Yes, it is a nice old place," returned her companion; "and quiet too; it stands so far back from the road. We are still in Disborough, you see; but when we turn that corner we shall be in Shepperton. Now look out. There are the Dene Cottages, where Compton and his wife, and Benton and his daughter, live. Benton is the gardener; and the servants do say that Andrew and Martha Benton mean to make a match of it. He lodges with the Bentons, you see. Martha's a good-

looking girl. She is now laundry-maid, and a perfect treasure, as I tell her father."

They had turned into a drive now, which led somewhat steeply to an old-fashioned grey stone house, which was quite invisible from the road. There was a wide, roomy porch filled with flowering plants, and as the carriage stopped the shrill barking of dogs was heard from within, and the scudding of tiny feet in the distance.

"Do you hear the children?" exclaimed Miss Durnford in great excitement. "Open the door quick, Rachel," as a tall young woman appeared in the porch. "Well, dear old General, are you glad to get Missis back? There, there, Tommy darling, don't eat me up, and you musn't growl at Baby in that ferocious fashion, for he is my precious pet," and Miss Durnford began fondling a beautiful Blenheim spaniel which had leapt into her arms with a whine of delight.

"Hush, children, hush, or our visitor will be deafened;" but Miss Durnford might as well have spoken to the wind, for the sound of that beloved voice only added to the dogs' excitement, as they barked, yelled, and hurled themselves against her with every demonstration of affection and joy. It ended finally by their mistress taking the pretty little fox-terrier, Tommy, under one arm, and Baby under the other; and then preceded by a huge, unwieldy pug, grey about the muzzle with age, and evidently oppressed by many infirmities, led the way to the drawing-room.

To Eunice, with her limited experience, the Dene appeared magnificent and altogether palatial. In reality, it was a well-built, comfortable house, suitable for the needs of a large family.

All the rooms were spacious, though not specially lofty. The hall was large, and full of handsome dark oak furniture, and the dining-room, library, and morning-room were all well-proportioned and cheerful, and furnished chiefly with the dark oak that the late Mr. Durnford had so admired. The drawing-room was charming

with its air of old-fashioned cosiness; and as Eunice glanced round it, at the square tea-table with its silver and antique china, at the circle of easy-chairs round the fire, and then at the inner room with its snug corners and tall palms, she could not help exclaiming, "What a beautiful room!" Miss Durnford looked gratified.

"There now, that is what people always say," she returned, "and I won't deny that in my opinion it beats the drawing-room at Chez-Nous hollow. I never could abide silver tables and Japanese fans, and all that Liberty nonsense."

"But this is perfect. You have furnished it so tastefully, with all those beautiful screens, and—" but Miss Durnford interrupted her.

"Lor', my dear, don't be praising me for things I have not done. I just left it all as the Wentworths arranged it—they were the people who lived here before us. I told father that if I touched a thing I should only spoil it. I altered my bedroom a bit, that's all; but Dorcas and Rachel know it is more than their place is worth if they venture to shift a table."

"May I just look at the garden for a moment before we have tea?" asked Eunice, with a girlish craving to explore her new surroundings.

Miss Durnford, who had thrown off her hat and jacket, and was seated on the rug, in the midst of her family, nodded acquiescence.

"Don't you be long though," she observed, "for Rachel is just bringing in the urn, and we will have our tea before we go upstairs. Besides, there is not much to see; Benton will have locked up the houses by this time, and the Dene garden is not much to boast of."

To her surprise, Eunice found that Miss Durnford was correct in this statement. There was very little flower-garden at the Dene.

A small tennis-lawn or bowling-green, with a steep grassy bank on one side and a wide flower-border on

the other, led to a tiny wood or wild garden of small extent. Beyond the bowling-green was a small park-like meadow.

At the side of the house there was a walled-in flower-garden, with square beds, and straight gravelled paths, and one or two arches for roses. Here there were glass-houses and cucumber-frames, and a tool-house, and a gate from which the stable-yard could be entered.

"Well, you are a bit disappointed, ain't you?" asked Miss Durnford shrewdly, as Eunice closed the window; "you were expecting a bigger place from the size of the house;" and the girl was too truthful to deny this.

"Well, it is big enough for my taste. You just wait until you see it in summer, when the hammocks are up in the wilderness—we always call it the wilderness—and we have tables and chairs under the big thorn, you would find it pleasant enough then."

"But I think it nice now," protested Eunice.

"Oh no, you don't," returned Miss Durnford obstinately; "you were expecting terraces and shrubberies, and goodness knows what. Well, I won't deny the flower-garden is an old-fashioned place, with those big beds and straightforward paths; but you should just see it when the roses and carnations and sweet-peas are out, and the bees are busy there from morning to night; why, you would love it as I do. I always spend my Sunday afternoons there, when it is not too hot. It reminds me of the days when father used to sit there reading his *Pilgrim's Progress* or Hervey's *Meditations,* for he always liked the old books here. Somehow I always think of father when I read of Mr. Honest. Now draw up that easy-chair and make yourself at home. There's Tommy wants to sit in your lap. He is always friendly with strangers, but Baby's a bit shy until he gets used to people."

As Baby's shyness took the form of snarling peevishly every time Eunice looked at him, and ringing his bells furiously, she thought it wise to ignore him altogether

and give her attention to Tommy. He was the prettiest little fox-terrier she had ever seen, with a coat that was as smooth and glossy as satin, and he was so lively and full of playful tricks. Meanwhile the aged General sat erect in his luxurious basket, with a tiny eider-down quilt beside him, looking at his mistress with the pathetically human expression peculiar to pugs.

"I must be giving the General his tea first, or he will stare me out of countenance," observed Miss Durnford presently. "Help yourself to some sandwiches; they are uncommonly tasty, and we don't have supper until late. I never care for dinner myself after a journey," she went on. "I make a good tea, and when my unpacking is done I put on my tea-gown and come downstairs. You see I have no one but myself to please," she continued with a touch of sadness in her voice, "and that gets me into bad ways. You will have to trim me up a bit, Miss Cleveland, before I forget my manners."

When tea was finished, and the dogs had been fed and put through their tricks, Miss Durnford suggested they should go upstairs, and Eunice followed her closely up the wide handsome staircase, and down a long passage which looked like a small picture-gallery, and then she opened a door leading into a large, cheerful room, with a bright fire, and an old-fashioned couch and deep easy-chair, and a pretty inlaid writing-table. All the furniture was Spanish mahogany, with the exception of the bedstead, which was brass. Eunice felt quite shy as she looked round. Surely no companion was ever so luxuriously lodged. Again Miss Durnford's sharp eyes interpreted her thoughts.

"Well now, I am glad you are pleased," she exclaimed in her hearty way; "and it does not matter a fig what Susan thinks, for it ain't her business which room you have. This used to be the spare room, but there are three or four more down the lobby, only they have never been used, as I have not a relation in the world, not even a cousin, to come and stay with me; but when I

wrote that the blue room was to be got ready for my companion, as it was opposite mine, why if the blessed woman was not clean affronted, and we had quite a tiff before I could make her hear reason."

"But Susan is right, and it is far too good for me, Miss Durnford. Any room would have done;" and as Eunice said this, an unseen listener, who was about to tap at the door, smiled sourly to herself, and muttered, "I should think so, indeed."

"Come in," in answer to the tap. "Oh, here is Susan," as a tall, severe-looking woman, with a brown front, and a black silk dress that rustled with richness, entered the room. She wore a large white bib-apron of frilled muslin, and had a watch ticking at her side. But for her sharp expression and thin lips she would have been a good-looking woman, but she was so stiff and stately and formidable that it gave Eunice quite a shock to see Miss Durnford hug her in the friendliest and most affectionate manner; but she had yet to find out that Susan's bark was worse than her bite, and that, in spite of her sharp tongue and aggravating ways, she doted on her mistress.

"Why did you not come and see me before this, you cross old thing?" asked Miss Durnford in her lively way. "This is Miss Cleveland, Susan, and you are to take her under your wing and make her comfortable."

"I always try to do my duty, Miss Jem," returned Susan, carefully ignoring Eunice as she spoke. "I have been unpacking your boxes while you were at tea, and perhaps you will be good enough to tell me where I am to put your things," and Susan's tone was so severely disapproving that her mistress got rather red.

"There now," she said, turning to Eunice, "did I not tell you that Susan would be lecturing me on my extravagance.—But you will just hold your tongue, Sukey, for I have brought you all the loveliest presents;" but Susan was not to be mollified.

"It is well you are made of money, Miss Jem," she

returned with a sniff. "But there, young folks will never learn wisdom. It is enough to make the master turn in his grave, poor body, to see the money you fling away;" and then she went out grumbling to herself, but Miss Durnford only laughed.

"Bless me, Susan is in a fine temper. We must mind our P's and Q's, Miss Cleveland. She is put about at my extravagance. She never can bear me to go to London without her. Well, well, a fool and his money are soon parted; but I am not afraid of the workhouse yet. Now, I must go and pacify her somehow. Would you like Dorcas to help you? Ah, I thought not," as Eunice shook her head. "I never could bear to have any one but Susan poking round me; but I am so used to her that I should miss her terribly."

It did not take Eunice long to unpack and arrange her things in the big wardrobe, and when she had changed her dress she sat down and wrote a loving little letter to Lucia, recording her first impressions of the Dene, and she had hardly finished it before Miss Durnford reappeared in a wonderfully elaborate tea-gown of old rose silk and lace, with her fringe freshly crimped and curled.

"Well, now you look quite cosy and at home," she said in an approving tone. "So you have been writing while I had a long nap. I have given the servants their presents, and even Susan says hers is beautiful. She is not near so grumpy now, only she won't look after you for a bit. That is just her jealousy, and because she wants to do everything for me herself."

"She frightens me dreadfully," whispered Eunice, as they went down the passage arm in arm in the friendliest way; but she spoke under her breath as they passed Miss Durnford's room, for she could see the grim figure of Susan looming in the background.

CHAPTER VII

GRASP YOUR NETTLE

My valour is certainly going! it is sneaking off!
I feel it oozing out, as it were, at the palm of my hands.
—(Mrs. Malaprop) *The Rivals.*

And sheathed their swords for lack of argument.
—*King Henry V.*

It was Miss Durnford's usual habit after a journey to retire to bed at an unconscionably early hour, and by nine o'clock she had wished Eunice good-night, and shut her up safely in her room; but the girl was far too excited and wakeful to seek her bed.

Miss Durnford's incessant chatter had tired her, and she was glad of a quiet hour to sit by the fire and review the long day, and the many, many acts of kindness she had already received from her hostess.

"I am treated like an honoured guest," she had written to Lucia that evening. "I have the best room in the house. If you and Daisy could only see it—but I will describe it more fully to-morrow. It is such a beautiful house, so delightfully old-fashioned and comfortable, and in such thoroughly good taste; but the people who lived here before are responsible for that. I should judge from her dress that Miss Durnford's taste in furniture would be somewhat dubious."

Eunice's thoughts were just straying to the End House, when a tap at the door startled her, and the next moment Susan stalked in. Her countenance still wore its expression of severe disapproval. Then a sudden inspiration came to the girl, and, acting on the impulse of a good

heart, she rose from her chair with a bright, welcoming smile.

"Oh, is that you, Susan?" she exclaimed. "I am so glad to see you; you know things are just a little bit strange to me to-day. I don't think I ever slept out of my own home before. That seems odd at my age, does it not?" But Susan ignored this question.

"Miss Durnford told me to be sure that you had everything you wanted," returned Susan shortly, "so as Dorcas is a bit forgetful—being a young thing—and too much took up with that lad of hers, I thought it would be better to come myself and have a look round;" but as Susan's glance lighted on the brass bedstead, with its new cretonne hangings, it was not in human nature to restrain a disdainful sniff. Then Eunice, with artful Machiavelian policy, set herself to disarm the enemy, and her weapons were dovelike in their simplicity.

"Isn't it beautiful," she said admiringly; "do you know, Susan," with a little laugh, "I have never slept in such a room before. If you had only seen the shabby little cabin of a room that I had for my own, leading out of the night-nursery, where the children slept, you would not wonder. It seems a palace to me; but it is far too good for the like of me, and I think Miss Durnford ought to change it." Then Susan unstiffened a little, and she looked, as Miss Durnford often remarked, "less like a graven image."

"She is too obstinate, miss," returned Susan, in an injured tone; "when Miss Jem's mind is made up, no one can make her hear reason, for her wilfulness is beyond everything. 'What do you want with giving the best spare room to the lady-companion,' I said to her myself; 'there's the little red room down the passage that has the morning sun, and would do quite nicely;' but no, she would not hear of it, or the green room either. It must be the blue room and nothing else, and there is that brass bedstead that the Colonel brought from Paris, and Miss Jem's favourite forget-me-not

chintz, and the clock and writing-table that Master gave her; and if you don't call that downright aggravating," finished Susan, taking the enemy into her confidence.

"I agree with you that it is as wrong as possible," returned Eunice sweetly; "and that Miss Durnford in her kindness has made a great mistake; but perhaps she will find it out for herself presently, and then she won't mind my changing it for the red room." But Eunice secretly hoped that this migration would not be considered necessary.

"Look here, Susan," she went on, "I want you to stand my friend as much as possible; you were Miss Durnford's old nurse, were you not? and you are her confidential maid, and her friend as well; so it would be so nice if I could come and ask you things, for though I am three-and-twenty, I have led such a home life that I have very little idea of the duties of a companion, and Miss Durnford is so kind and considerate that I would not disappoint her for worlds."

"Ay, she is all that, bless her"—and here Susan's stern features relaxed, and she actually smiled. All the household were devoted to their kind-hearted mistress, but to Susan Trotter she was better than kith and kin, and even Jem herself hardly knew of the tenderness that lurked under that dour manner, and how her homeliness and want of culture only endeared her the more to Susan.

"With all her money she is not a bit stuck up," she would say to her crony, Mrs. Compton. "She is never ashamed of the shop and her humble upbringing; why, when Miss Jem was a baby there was only a little girl to do the rough work, and Mrs. Durnford had to serve in the shop, and do her own cooking too; don't I remember the pork-chops we always had on the fifth of November, and apple turnovers to follow, because it was the old Master's birthday, and he always relished pork-chops."

Eunice had gained an easy victory; her artless praise

of Miss Durnford and the blue room had won Susan's heart, though her pride would not have owned it that night.

"Well, now, I must not be keeping you up, missie," she said quite pleasantly; "don't burn your face over the fire too long and lose your beauty-sleep, for young folk want a deal of rest," and then she withdrew and left Eunice to seek repose in the beautiful brass bed that a countess had once slept in. Eunice was sound asleep when Dorcas woke her the next morning by placing a dainty little tea-tray beside her as she drew up the blind. The soft October sunshine lighted up the room; it looked more charming than ever in the morning light.

How strange it was to be able to dress herself without ceaseless interruptions from the night-nursery. Judy in her little red-flannel dressing gown to beg auntie to comb out a big tangle in her hair; or Lot barefooted, and in the lightest of attire, adjuring her with slow solemnity to button his vestie, because Lot's fingers were cold. As soon as possible she looked out of the window, and then she could hardly restrain an exclamation of delight.

Instead of the yard and the water-butt, and old disused hampers, and a few ship logs, Eunice was looking down on the bowling-green, with its grassy bank, and the pretty little park-like meadow beyond, where she could see an old grey pony grazing.

Andrew was brushing up a few dead leaves, while a blackbird and his mate watched him in the distance; and big brown thrushes hopped fearlessly over the grass. A robin was perched on a bough, and a blue-tit skimmed lightly past. How pure and sweet and dewy it looked, how different to Langton Green; the very sparrows looked nicer—fat, clean little fellows, as tame as possible, for there were no cats at the Dene. Miss Durnford had a dislike to the animal, and at the Dene cottage not even a kitten dare show its face. Eunice wondered if she might put on her hat and have a run out. Then

she remembered that Miss Durnford had told her that it was Liberty Hall, and that she always took an extra nap after her London journey, so there was no occasion for her to stay indoors, especially as she had no idea where to go.

Eunice had a delicious sense of excitement and adventure as she slipped through an open glass door leading to the garden; the grass was too wet for her to explore the wilderness, so she strolled into the walled flower-garden and admired the hardy chrysanthemums and a lovely Pyracanthea japonica that festooned the walls, and then she peeped into the greenhouses, where a grey-haired, muscular-looking man was at work, whom she guessed was Benton, and who took her round the houses and told her the names of the different plants in the most painstaking and civil manner, while Eunice listened in awestruck admiration.

"I think if I were a man," she observed suddenly, as Benton cut a spray of lemon verbena to go with some heliotrope he had picked for her, "I would rather be a gardener than anything; think of spending one's days with all these beautiful things."

"It is not a bad business," agreed Benton, but he spoke without enthusiasm; in reality he would not have changed his position with any man living; "but it has its drawbacks, miss. There are nights when the houses get on my mind, so that I can't sleep. What with the flues going wrong, and Andrew forgetting to close the windows; and then there are the green-fly and the slugs, and all those nasty varmints eating up my best plants and wearing my life out—not to speak of the rheumatics, which always has a special spite against gardeners," and Benton sighed, and then remarked that Andrew would be wanting him, and at this hint Eunice thanked him and withdrew.

There was another green door that led to the road, but it was locked, so Eunice contented herself by pacing up and down the garden paths, and wondering if the

little green arbour in the corner was the spot where Miss Durnford's father had read his *Pilgrim's Progress* on Sunday afternoons.

The cooing of pigeons from the stable-yard presently attracted her attention, and she was just peeping through the half-open door when she caught sight of a bicycle leaning against the wall; the next moment there was the whirring of innumerable wings, as a crowd of pigeons flew hastily to the stable roof, and a tall figure in a brown tweed shooting-coat, which she recognised at once, crossed the yard in her direction.

Eunice had no time to efface herself, for Mr. Hilton had seen her, and raised his cap; to her surprise he joined her at once. "What a lovely morning," he said pleasantly; "have you been enjoying an early stroll? I bicycled over from Medfield, and I have been inspecting Dick's lame leg, but there is not much amiss with it; he is not as young as he was, poor old chap, and I fancy it is a touch of rheumatism; he is a bit stiff. I wonder," glancing at the windows, "if Miss Durnford is up yet, for I am going to ask her to give me some breakfast?"

"I do not know. I will go up and see," returned Eunice, who was rather embarrassed by her position. A matutinal walk with a young man who stood nearly six foot six in his boots was a new and somewhat alarming experience. He did not know to whom he was speaking. Should she tell him she was the new companion. Oddly enough, Mr. Hilton's next remark led up to this.

"Are you going to make a long stay at the Dene—Miss—ah," with a laugh, "I forgot we were not introduced yesterday."

"My name is Cleveland," returned Eunice simply, "and I am Miss Durnford's new companion; so I shall certainly hope to stay for some time," and then they both laughed, and after that things were on a more comfortable footing, and Mr. Hilton proposed that they should walk up and down the gravel path under the dining-room window, until Miss Durnford beckoned to

them, "which I trust, begging your pardon, will happen before long," he went on, "for I am as hungry as a hunter after my ride. Ah, there she is," as the window was flung up, and Miss Durnford's shrill voice called to them.

"Come in, Douglas; what a good fellow you are, to be sure. Breakfast is ready, and cooling. Wherever did you pick him up, Miss Cleveland? Here I have been thumping at your door for ever so long, and then I heard voices and looked out."

"Good gracious! what should I be wanting with you before breakfast?" returned Miss Durnford, bustling to her place at the table; "wet grass and early worms aren't in my line at all, as my friend there will tell you," and Miss Durnford looked over her coffee-pot at the young man with a knowing smile. "I was always a drowsy head in the morning, and I don't mend as I grow older. Help yourself to some of that ham, Douglas; it is in prime condition, and I never tasted a better flavour. Well, what about Dick?" And then Mr. Hilton gave his report with the utmost decorum and gravity.

"I must be getting back soon," he observed presently; "by the bye, shall we meet you and Miss Cleveland at Chez-Nous on Saturday?"

"You mean at Mrs. Pater's birthday party? No, I ain't going, Douglas; parties ain't in my line at all." Miss Durnford spoke rather bluntly. "As for Miss Cleveland, they don't know of her existence, so of course she is not asked."

"That can easily be mended," returned Mr. Hilton, rising from his chair, and towering over them like an amiable Fee-fo-fum; "the Paters are coming over to our place this afternoon, and Lilian can give them a hint."

"I beg that she will do nothing of the kind," was the unexpected answer, and Miss Durnford looked rather disturbed; "didn't I just say that I did not hold with parties?"

"Now, Miss Jem, however could you bring yourself

to utter such a fib," and Douglas Hilton regarded her with assumed severity. "If you had only seen her dance Sir Roger de Coverley with the bailiff at our Christmas gathering," he continued, addressing Eunice; "why, she tired all the girls out." Then Miss Durnford gave a shamed little laugh.

"Friars' Farm and Chez-Nous are different places," she returned. "Oh, I know, Douglas, I have my likes and dislikes as strong as most people, and Mrs. Pater has a trick of rubbing me up the wrong way; she makes fun of me when my back's turned because I ain't a born lady, and haven't learnt her society ways. Why, I heard her mimicking me to Araby one day, when she thought I had gone, and she did it so cleverly too, the little monkey, that I could have clapped my hands at her."

"Oh, it is only her fun," returned the young man with an amused look.

"Of course, I know it is her fun," agreed Miss Durnford; "she is just a kitten of a woman; only kittens scratch sometimes. It is my belief that she pretty near teases the life out of the Captain; and why ever he took up with her, a grave, stiff, clever man like him, it just beats me to find out; but Araby assures me he is devoted to her."

"And why not," asked Mr. Hilton, smiling; "in my opinion Mrs. Pater is a charming little person; but you are prejudiced. Mrs. Pater does me the honour of taking me off to the life sometimes, and as she is a clever mimic, I enjoy it thoroughly, though it puts Lil's back up sometimes. Come, Miss Jem," in a coaxing, boyish manner, "don't be obstinate and get notions in your head. The Paters are friendly people and your nearest neighbours, let bygones be bygones, and come to the birthday party."

"No, I won't, for all your wheedling and blarney," and Miss Durnford got very red; "why, my dear lad, I told them that I should not be back from town, and I never expected I should be, only Susan wrote to tell me that the General was in a bad way. Now, mind,

Douglas," blinking at him in a friendly fashion, "don't you or Lilian betray me, I am *incog.*—I am, until after Thursday," and here the little woman laughed merrily, and Mr. Hilton shook his head at her as he went away.

"Do tell me about those people," asked Eunice curiously; but Miss Durnford was rattling her key-basket in a housewifely fashion.

"So I will, dear, just as soon as I have got through my business, which won't be for a couple of hours yet; for I have to make the round of the cottages and stables, and there is no saying how long Benton and Mrs. Compton will keep me."

"But I can help you, can I not?" and Eunice looked anxiously at her employer; "have you any letters for me to write, or can I help Susan?" But this question seemed to perplex Miss Durnford.

"Lor' bless you, my dear, I never have any letters, unless my lawyer has a bit of business to settle, and then I have to write myself. If I kept a secretary," with a little chuckling laugh, "the poor thing would have to sit with folded hands from morning to night."

It was impossible not to laugh at Miss Durnford's droll expression; but Eunice, who was very much in earnest, and had a conscientious desire to enter on her new duties at once, would not yield the point.

"Then perhaps I could help Susan," she observed. unless my lawyer has a bit of business to settle, and mending, and I have always been handy with my needle."

"That's good hearing," returned Miss Durnford approvingly; "I like young folk to be industrious; but Dorcas has charge of the house linen, and as for helping my old Sukey, she won't let any one but herself lay a finger on my things, much less mend them, and it would only affront her mortally for you to offer to touch them. Why, my dear," she continued placidly, "we were only settling this morning, when Susan was brushing my hair, that Dorcas has so much free time that she might help you with your jobs, for the linen-press

is just in beautiful condition, and there is not enough for her to do."

Eunice opened her eyes rather widely at this; instead of helping Susan, Dorcas was to be at her service. What in the world was she expected to do for her living? Then her glance rested on the flower vases, and her spirit revived. "Oh, I know," she exclaimed cheerfully, "I can take charge of the plants and flower vases; it will be new work, but I think I could soon learn to arrange them nicely." But, to her dismay, Miss Durnford's face wore an alarmed expression.

"Oh, my dear, I daren't let you do it; it would only upset Rachel, and she does arrange the vases so beautifully. Her father is the butler up at Medfield Hall, and he always gets the prize at the village flower-show for his table decorations, and Rachel has just got his knack; no one ever touches the plants but Rachel. That is the worst of having good servants, you ain't your own mistress; why, I dare not take a pot of jam out of the store cupboard without Compton's leave, or pick a flower in the greenhouse without Benton turning crusty, and as for looking into the harness-room once in a way, why, I believe even Pierce would order me out."

It was impossible to describe the girl's feelings as Miss Durnford rambled on in her garrulous way, but when she came to a full stop, Eunice asked in a voice that had the calmness of despair—

"Miss Durnford, please, will you have the goodness to tell me what my duties are supposed to be—in short, what I am to do?" Then the little woman gazed at her rather blankly.

"Lor', my dear, how am I to know?" she said helplessly. "I never had a companion before; but we shall find lots of things by and by, never fear. I will tell you what, we will go over to Friars' Farm one day and have a little talk with Lilian. She is such a sensible little creature as never was, and I usually take her advice. Why, it was Lilian who first put the idea of having a

companion in my head. 'Why don't you get a nice, cheerful young lady to keep you company?' she said, when I was telling her I could not relish my meals for loneliness. Bless you, I nearly jumped out of my chair when she said it. 'That's a real fluke, Lil,' I returned, 'and I will go up to town and see about the young lady at once.' And here she is, as large as life," went on Miss Durnford, beaming on her, "and if you will just make yourself at home, that is all I ask. Now go into the morning-room, there is always a fire there, and write your letters, and we will have a walk or a drive after luncheon, just to show you the place," and then the chirpy little creature bustled off, followed by Tommy and the Baby, while the General wheezed and dozed under his eider-down, and dreamt of the happy days when he was a strong young pug, and hunted cats in the cottage gardens.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ORIGINAL STUDY

The world is the book of women. Whatever knowledge they may possess is more commonly acquired by observation than reading.—ROUSSEAU.

EUNICE'S feelings were a little mixed as she placed herself at the writing-table in the old-fashioned bay window of the morning-room overlooking a corner of the tennis-lawn and the wilderness, but her sense of humour soon got the upper hand, and more than once she had to lay aside her pen as her frame shook with suppressed laughter.

She gave Lucia such a ridiculous version of her conversation with Miss Durnford that Shirley threw back his head and roared with amusement, while Daisy drummed with her heels on the rug in a perfect ecstasy of mirth. That letter enlivened the inmates of the End House to a surprising extent.

"As far as I can see," summed up Eunice, with an attempt at seriousness, "I am holding a sinecure's post, without any special duties attached to it. Miss Durnford has excellent servants, who do all she requires; even Baby's silky mane is combed and brushed every day by Rachel. Miss Durnford's ideas on the subject of a companion are touchingly elementary; we are to wait until something turns up, and so on." Well might Lucia heave a gentle sigh as she thought of Eunice's luxurious idleness and glanced at the heaped-up mending-basket beside her.

When Eunice had finished her letter she strolled into the library, and after a careful study of the book-shelves,

selected a book and read with much enjoyment and a secret feeling of guilt until luncheon time, when the gong roused her.

She found Miss Durnford in the dining-room surrounded by her family.

"Well, my dear," she said briskly, "how have you been getting on? I thought of you once or twice, but I was too busy to look after you; the morning's never long enough for me. I have been in the store cupboard with Mrs. Compton, till I am just footsore with standing."

"And I have been enjoying myself and doing nothing," exclaimed Eunice, with a twinge of conscience. "Dear Miss Durnford, why did you not send for me?"

"Lor', my dear, why should I? There was nothing for you to do. Mrs. Compton and I are often busy, especially at this season, when there is never room for the jars of blackberry jam and the cherry brandy. I shall have to get Roberts to put up a new cupboard or press if Mrs. Compton will make all these preserves," she continued, as she carved the joint. "'Enough is as good as a feast,' I tell her—but then she will have it that we cannot have too much. Now, I wonder," struck by a certain unconscious wistfulness in Eunice's eyes, "if your young folk would like some of my blackberry jam? It is not the sort to keep, you know, and there is more than we can use ourselves. I will tell you what we will do, Miss Cleveland, Mrs. Compton shall put half-a-dozen pots in a hamper and some honey from Friars' Farm, and a couple of bottles of cherry brandy for your brother to warm him on cold winter nights. There is not such cherry brandy as ours to be tasted anywhere, though I say it as shouldn't. Even Lilian declares it beats theirs hollow, and Douglas has a glass whenever he drops in on a bitter morning."

"But you are really too kind," stammered Eunice, quite colouring with pleasure, as she thought of Judy's and Lot's round eyes at tea-time; but she was not

allowed to say another word. When she had lived a little longer at the Dene she soon found out two things. First, that Miss Durnford was invariably busy in the morning, and always appeared at luncheon in a state of good-humoured bustle; and, secondly, that packing hampers with good things for invalids or people in poor circumstances was a very ordinary occurrence at the Dene, and regarded by the excellent Mrs. Compton as part of the day's work.

They drove in the afternoon, Miss Durnford explaining that they must do their ten miles or so, as the bays required exercise, and that she would show Eunice the minster and chapter house another day, and Eunice cheerfully acquiescing in this, they drove out into the country, and it was dusk before they returned.

The drawing-room looked deliciously cosy in the gloaming; a shaded lamp on the tea-table only diffused a soft subdued light, which blended with the warm ruddiness of the blazing logs.

"Doesn't it look comfortable?" observed Miss Durnford complacently, as she threw off her wraps and furs. "No, don't touch them, my dear," as Eunice would have carried them off. "Rachel will take them when she has brought the urn in. I always say this is the pleasantest hour of the day, though one gets a little drowsy somehow if there is no one to speak to. That is why you are such a comfort to me," with a friendly nod at her companion. "There is some one to answer me back and talk a bit when one has a fancy for a chat; that is what we want, don't we, General?" looking fondly into the old dog's bleared but faithful eyes. "Oh, Lilian was a wise child when she told me to look out for a nice young lady who would be companionable and make herself pleasant."

"I do want to be a comfort to you, Miss Durnford," returned the girl, feeling herself quite drawn to this simple, kindly creature. "You know, I can play and sing a little—not much," blushing—"for I have not had

many advantages, and so little time to practise; but they liked my voice at home."

"Then I shall be sure to like it too, dear," returned Miss Durnford good-naturedly. "How nice that will be, to have a little music in the evening; and there's Lilian, too, who sings like a bird. I will write to Mozley to send a man over to tune the piano. Don't forget to remind me, Miss Cleveland, for my head is like a sieve, as Susan often tells me."

"But why need you trouble; I can write to Mr. Mozley for you if you will give me his address," returned Eunice composedly.

"Why, to be sure, I never thought of that," in a relieved tone, "and I do hate putting pen to paper. I would rather cover a hundred jam-pots than write a note; so that's settled. You shall have the address and write to Mozley in the morning, but we are both too tired for business to-night." Eunice thought it better not to contradict her, though she was as fresh as a lark after her drive; but her active brain had just formulated another brilliant idea, which she hastened to communicate to her hostess.

"Miss Durnford, would it not be pleasant if I were to read aloud to you sometimes in the evening, you have so many nice books? I have been looking at them in the library, and winter evenings are so long."

It was evident that this proposition quite took away Jem's breath; she ruminated over it quite seriously as she helped herself to some cake.

"Well now, isn't that a good idea!" she observed at last. "I am behindhand with my charity-knitting for the sale of work at the Vicarage; there is a comforter or two to do yet, and I could be getting on with them first-rate while you read to me. I will look out the wools and the needles to-morrow, and you can fix on some book. I rather like a story myself, something exciting, like *The Woman in White* or *The House on the Marsh,* only that is a bit creepy." Then as Eunice's face fell a

little at this, for she and Lucia had been unaccustomed to such stimulating and exciting form of literature, Jem continued with her customary good nature, "Lor', my dear, please yourself and you'll please me. I ain't a bookworm, and nothing will make me one, and mother wasn't one either; but I like a good tale that keeps you awake and gives you something to think about."

"I was wondering if you would care for *Villette,*" hazarded Eunice rather timidly. "I have just begun it, and like it so much; and it is about Brussels."

"About Brussels—why, you don't say so?" and Jem opened her blue eyes very widely. "How clever of you to pick that out so quickly! Oh, we will have *Villette,* and you shall read to me to-morrow evening."

"We will play bezique to-night," she continued; "if you don't know it, I can teach it you in no time, for you ain't one of the stupid ones;" but as Eunice explained that she had often played it with Lucia and her brother, Miss Durnford fairly beamed with satisfaction. "There now, didn't I say you would be a comfort to me—a real solid lump of comfort," she exclaimed, pushing back her chair. "Now I must be going upstairs, for Susan wants me, but there's no need for you to move for the next half-hour. Dorcas will have only just lighted your fire, and the blue room will be just an ice-house." Eunice was quite content to remain. On the whole, she was rather pleased with herself; really her suggestion of reading aloud was a brilliant one. Perhaps after a time Miss Durnford would let her read some improving book of travels, or biography; they would get so tired of novels every evening; so thought Eunice in her youthful zeal and ignorance, but she did not know her woman.

Jem was a contented ignoramus, and had no intellectual yearnings; she loved all stories, especially love stories, and any form of exciting fiction. Nothing pleased her better than weird descriptions which, to use her own words, "gave you the creeps."

Jem loved to feel nice and creepy, and she would shed oceans of tears over the sorrows of her favourite heroines. Eunice soon found her a delightfully sympathetic listener; it was rather thrilling, after Lucia's well-bred and somewhat languid interest, to look up from her book and see Jem, with big tears coursing down her round face, blinking her eyes with excitement. "Oh, poor dear, how ever will she bear it?" she almost gasped, when that well-known telegram was to be read.

"Dear Miss Durnford, it is not true; please don't cry any more," she once observed quite pleadingly.

"It is true to me," observed Jem, drying her eyes with an absurd lace handkerchief; "that is the worst of me, dear. I have got to live with the people all through—I can't help myself. When they are happy I feel cheerful, and when things go wrong I am quite down myself. Why, when I was reading *The House on the Marsh,* I screamed and nearly went into a fit because Rachel startled me, and I was obliged to get Susan to sleep with me for nights, though she did snore so, poor old thing."

But if Jem loved novels, she was still more devoted to games, and no child could look forward to them with keener delight. Nothing came amiss to her—bezique, cribbage, backgammon, even draughts and patience; and in summer she played croquet with indefatigable activity. Tennis she played badly, and chess was impossible.

"I ain't got the head for it," she would say; "'it takes clever people like you and the Captain to play it,' as I often tell Mrs. Pater when she is begging me to learn the moves,—not that it is a game at all, to judge by their faces; it is for all the world as though they were at some difficult task—trying to wheel stones up the hill like that ridiculous old person—I forget his name."

"Sisyphus, I suppose you mean."

"Oh, yes, that was the old fellow. Now don't you be laughing at me for a dunce, Miss Cleveland. I was

never one to set the Thames on fire, as father used to say;" but Jem laughed in her own cheery fashion as she trotted out of the room.

The following morning Eunice determined to turn her leisure hours to account by taking a long walk. In doing so she lost her way, and only reached the Dene when Miss Durnford was half-way through her luncheon. Many and profuse were her apologies; but her hostess hardly listened to them.

"Bless me, what a fuss about nothing!" she observed. "Haven't I eaten my luncheon alone many and many a time. So you lost yourself, did you; we will tell Lilian that," for it had been arranged for them to drive over to Monkbarn that afternoon, "and won't she have a laugh at you. Dear, what a colour you have got, child! what a pity your brother can't see you!" and Jem looked at her admiringly. Eunice always appeared at her best advantage when she was a little flushed and excited. "That reminds me," continued Jem, flying off at a tangent as usual, "that we have sent off the hamper; Andrews took it to the station. As I was bound to fill it up, I put in some of our home-made marmalade that you liked so much, and a few apples."

Jem spoke in a casual, offhand way; but Lucia's letter to Eunice, enclosing a note for Miss Durnford, treated the matter very differently.

"I am perfectly overwhelmed with Miss Durnford's liberality and kindness," she wrote; "she seems to be a perfect Lady Bountiful. The hamper she has sent us is splendid—half-a-dozen big pots of blackberry jam, a great jar of marmalade—you know how Shirley loves home-made marmalade,—some beautiful honey, two bottles of cherry brandy, and every crevice filled up with great rosy-cheeked apples and immense baking pears."

"I wish we had some of those ginger snaps," observed Jem regretfully, as she affixed the label; "but there, we can send some next time. Now, to-morrow we will get a hamper ready for the Hargraves, Compton." The

Hargraves were a family in whom Miss Durnford was much interested. The father, who had been a bank clerk at Shelgate, being consumptive and unable to work, the whole task of providing for the family—a sick husband and seven children—depending solely on the wife's exertions; Mrs. Hargrave was a National School mistress, and Miss Durnford was never weary of praising her energy and courage. Every week a hamper filled with good things made glad the hearts of the household in Mendip Street.

Eunice was longing to tell her adventures, but it was not easy to find a break in the conversation; for Jem in her unconscious egotism was apt to ramble on in her discursive way on every little domestic incident, and by the time she had finished, it was so late that they had to get ready for their drive.

It was not until they were seated in the carriage that Eunice found her opportunity.

"Oh, I never told you about my walk," she began. "I went miles and miles through fields, and down such pretty lanes, and I hardly met a creature, except some men mending the road and a poor old woman with a market-basket; but the air was so delicious, and the red and brown leaves on the trees so lovely, that I felt as though I could walk for ever. I never knew October was such a beautiful month," continued the girl with enthusiasm; "but the rich coppery tints of the foliage against the blue sky were a perfect dream."

"Lor', my dear!" ejaculated Jem; but in her heart she thought Miss Cleveland was a beautiful talker.

"I was afraid it was getting late, so I turned back at last; but somehow I must have taken the wrong road, but I never found out my mistake for some time. If only I could have met some one, but there was not a creature in sight—it was so silent and lonely that I got quite nervous at last, and even a cow would have seemed company."

"Why, wherever could you have been?" observed her companion in a wondering voice.

"I haven't an idea," returned Eunice. "I found myself at last in a beautiful meadow, shut in with a little wood, and a gate opening into a lane; there were fields stretching away into the distance, and just by the roadside there was a tiny rivulet, a mere thread of water, with some natural rocks clothed with creeping plants."

"Bless me, child," exclaimed Miss Durnford, "you must have been in Birdhurst Lane, close to Brocklebank and the Dene! Why, I know the place well."

"Yes, but you must remember I was ignorant of my bearings, and I had no idea I was so near home. I was getting a bit bothered, when I came suddenly to a cottage standing back in rather a nice little garden, and then I determined to ask the way."

Jem blinked her eyes in rather an animated fashion.

"Why, that's where old Betty Prior lives," she observed. "She is a decent body, but as deaf as a post."

"So I found. I had to scream at her at last, but even then I could not make her understand I had lost my way; she only tilted back her sun-bonnet and stared at me.

"'I'm hard of hearing, missy,' she kept saying; 'you must speak louder.' What a wrinkled, funny old face she has got! her mouth and chin are like nut crackers, and her skin is like parchment; she must be ninety at least."

"No; Betty is not much over seventy, but she has had a hard life, and a peck of troubles, as they say; but she is as tough and wiry as possible. Well, whatever did you do to make her understand, Miss Cleveland, for it ain't a bit of use shouting at her?"

"I don't know what I should have done," returned Eunice, "only a little boy in a sailor suit ran out of the cottage and pulled her by the skirt; he was such a

pretty, delicate-looking little fellow, with large beautiful brown eyes—I suppose he was her grandson."

"You are wrong there, my dear," returned Miss Durnford hastily; "Betty's children died before they were grown up, and she never had a grandchild. Now, whoever could it be?" rather curiously. "I expect Betty has got lodgers."

"I daresay," replied Eunice; "and the child looked as though he belonged to gentlefolk, though I must say his sailor suit was rather shabby. I don't know how he made her understand, but she told him by and by to take me to the end of the lane, and the dear little fellow slipped his hand in mine in the most confiding way.

"He told me his name was Billy, and that he and his daddy had been living a long time with Betty, and that it was a nice place, and he never wished to leave it."

"'Dad is so clever,' he went on; 'he paints such beautiful pictures, and he writes stories, and there is nothing he can't do; but he never, never has time to play with Billy'—he finished with such a pathetic voice."

"You may depend upon it, he is the new lodger. Betty often has people in the summer; she lets the parlour, and the bedroom over it. I tell you what, Miss Cleveland—we will pay Betty a visit one of these days—it is not five minutes' walk to Honey Hanger, as they call the cottage, for Betty is noted for her honey, and folks always give it that name,—and then we shall find out all about Billy," for, as Eunice soon discovered for herself, Jem was rather an inquisitive little person, and indulged in a good deal of harmless curiosity on the subject of her neighbours.

CHAPTER IX

LILIAN GIVES HER ADVICE

Although in a very humble and apparently confined sphere of action, who can tell the effect even our influence or that of our conduct may have upon others, and its reaction throughout future ages.—W. H. SMITH.

Smiles are as catching as tears.—MAETERLINCK.

MISS DURNFORD'S questions and surmises on the subject of the mysterious strangers at Honey Hanger occupied her for the remainder of the drive, and it was not until Eunice called her attention to a beautiful old grey gateway almost covered witn ivy that she observed in an astonished tone that they had actually reached their destination. "We were so busy talking," she continued, "that I never noticed we were at Medfield."

"And this is Monkbarn!" ejaculated Eunice, with involuntary admiration. "What a dear old place it looks —but more like a gentleman's house than a farm."

They had driven under the archway as she spoke, and down below them, in a sort of deep hollow, was a grey, picturesque-looking house with turrets and gables and wide mullioned windows, and a deep porch with stone seats on either side of the massive door.

"Ay, it is a fine old place," replied Miss Durnford, "and Douglas is as proud of it as he can be; but in my opinion it ought to have been built on the top of the Hill Meadow.

"It was old Spencer Hilton, Douglas's great-grandfather, who built it just where the monastery used to stand, and the hall is part of the old refectory. You can't see the farm buildings from here because of that yew hedge, and they have got their own entrance round

the corner in Medfield Lane. There, jump out," as the carriage stopped, "for there's Lilian waiting for us at the door; she must have seen us drive in.—Well," rather loudly, "I have brought you a visitor, Lil, a new friend of mine, Miss Cleveland," and Jem bundled out of the carriage, while the two girls shook hands and gravely reconnoitred each other after the ordinary feminine fashion.

It is generally a mistake to praise people before one has made their acquaintance. Miss Durnford had talked so much of Lilian Hilton, and had expressed herself in such an enthusiastic manner concerning her management, that Eunice had formed quite an extravagant ideal of the young mistress of Monkbarn.

She was therefore somewhat disappointed when a short, dark-complexioned girl, with rather plain features, in neat serge bicycling costume, stepped into the shadowy porch, and held out her hand in a friendly manner. Her voice was pleasant, but somewhat deep in tone; but Eunice discovered later that her brightness and animation and her total absence of self-consciousness so endeared her to her friends, that very few of them would allow that Lilian was plain.

"Dear Miss Jem, this is so good of you!" exclaimed the girl, kissing her with the utmost warmth. Eunice found out afterwards that most of her intimate friends called her "Miss Jem"; it seemed to be a pet name with them. "Douglas and I have been over to Septon and have only just come in. He is in his den with the bailiff just now, but he will join us by and by."

"Let me take you to our sitting-room, Miss Cleveland. Ah! you are looking at the hall; isn't it a curious old place? I daresay Miss Jem told you that in old days this was part of the refectory."

"Yes, she told me, but I have never seen anything like this," and Eunice gazed with awestruck eyes at the oak rafters and dark panelled walls, and an oddly winding staircase that seemed to lead to an open gallery.

There were two windows on either side of the porch, but they were so deeply set in the stone that except on sunny days there was very little light, and a stained-glass window on the staircase only cast faint ruddy gleams on the stone steps. A huge fireplace almost hidden in greenery occupied one end of the hall; a high-backed settle, a square oak table, and a beautifully carved grandfather's clock gave an air of quaint, mediæval comfort.

"Bless me, Lil," observed Miss Durnford, with a shiver, "how dark and cold it looks; you will give us the creeps if we stay here much longer. You should just see it in winter, Miss Cleveland, it is not like the same place; there are rugs and screens, and a big fire instead of all that green rubbish; and when the lamps are lighted, and Lilian makes tea at that table, and Douglas brings his books and papers, it is enough to make the old friars rise out of their graves with envy."

"My brother and I often like to sit here on winter evenings," explained Lilian merrily to Eunice. "He always laughs at the notion that Friars' Hall is haunted; but though I am not nervous or credulous, and am not sure that I believe in ghosts, I should not care to come down here at midnight, though Douglas has done it more than once when he wanted a paper out of the smoking-room."

"You don't say so, Lil!" and Jem spoke in a horrified tone. "It was just tempting Providence. But there, I'm bound he never told you what he saw. He is like an iron safe, is Douglas, when it pleases him."

"But, my dear Miss Jem, he never saw or heard anything except the mice scuttling behind the wainscot," replied Lilian, smiling.

"But what was it he was supposed to see?" asked Eunice curiously. Then Lilian laughed again in a hearty, girlish fashion.

"Oh, it is such nonsense," she returned. "Just because this bit of the hall was built on that part of

the refectory where the abbot used to sit at the high table, the country-folk declare that when the clock strikes twelve a procession of ghostly monks, with faces hidden in their cowls, carry great silver dishes round the hall. They say some sinful old abbot, with royal blood in his veins, always had his carp and venison served up on silver. But I will spare you the rest of the nonsense, or our dear Miss Jem will have the creeps in earnest. Now, please, come to my sitting-room. We have no drawing-room at Monkbarn; it is contrary to our family tradition. We either sit here or in the hall. The dining-room and my brother's private sanctum—a sort of combination of workshop and smoking-den—complete our list of living-rooms."

Nothing could be pleasanter or more homelike than the low white panelled room into which Lilian ushered them, with its bright fire, and well-littered tables, and cosy chairs. One side of the room was lined with dwarf bookcases in white wood, a Chippendale cabinet filled with old china stood opposite the fireplace, and small oil-paintings and cases of miniatures occupied every available space. The window was in a wide recess with a cushioned seat below it. It was heavily mullioned and filled with tiny diamond-shaped panes. As Lilian threw open a casement Eunice exclaimed with delight at the pleasant outlook.

Just below them was a terrace, with a flight of steps leading to an immense pond. Some flower-borders and a rose-covered trellis surrounded it. Beyond, only divided by a wire fence, invisible in the waning light, there was a steep upland meadow that culminated in a sort of knoll, where two or three huge trees stood as landmarks for miles round.

"Is that the Hill Meadow, where Miss Durnford said the house ought to have been built?" asked Eunice, gazing at the soft grassy hill that stretched above her.

"Oh, she always says that," returned Lilian, with an air of amusement. "Miss Jem is such a terribly unprac-

tical person. Why, the knoll is quite steep and rocky. There are not half-a-dozen yards of level ground; and even if this difficulty could have been overcome, it is far too exposed a situation. No, we are far better in the hollow; and since Douglas has completed the drainage there is not a vestige of damp anywhere.

"Look well at the pond, Miss Cleveland, before I close the window. Five hundred years ago there were carp there. At present it is given up to some ducks of a foreign breed. Now I will ring for lights and tea, and then we can be cosy."

Eunice began to think that Miss Durnford was right; and certainly Lilian was a charming little hostess; it seemed so natural to her to make people comfortable, and she had such a pleasant way of finding out their tastes and always remembering what they liked.

Eunice was rather glad that Mr. Hilton continued to efface himself. She thought they were far more comfortable without him—the masculine element is somewhat bracing, and apt to drive feminine trivialities into corners.

She was rather amused, however, when Miss Durnford gave utterance to this very thought.

"Well now, I am not sorry that Douglas does not hurry himself," she said presently, in a tone of enjoyment. "There is something that Miss Cleveland and I want to talk to you about, Lil. You have got such a sensible little head, that I know you will give us the best of advice." Then it was pleasant to see the quiet, attentive air with which Lilian prepared herself to listen.

"You know how pleased I shall be to help you, dear Miss Jem," she said quite earnestly. "Not that my opinion is worth much."

"There now, don't you undervalue yourself, for there is not any one who gives better and sounder advice, though you are but a young thing;" and Miss Durnford patted her favourite on the shoulder very kindly.

"It is not that I doubt your willingness, dear, for never was there a more helpful little creature—" but hesitating and blinking, "I am most afraid to explain myself for fear you should have the laugh against me."

"Miss Jem, how can you be so naughty and unkind —as though I ever laugh at my friends? Do you know, you are giving Miss Cleveland quite a bad impression of me."

"Bless me, Lil, you don't say so?" and Miss Durnford looked alarmed. "Well now, I won't be shilly-shallying any more. Don't you remember that hot afternoon when we had tea in the porch, and I was a bit out of sorts and complaining of my loneliness? 'Why don't you get a nice young lady to live with you and keep you company?'—those were your very words."

"Yes, I remember, returned Lilian thoughtfully. "Well—you are not going to tell me that my idea was not a good one?"

"No, I am not going to be so ungrateful. Don't I always take your advice, Lil? I just went up to town as soon as I could spare time and brought the young lady back with me, and here she is," with a triumphant smile. "And though I ought not to say it to her face, a better companion I never found—or am likely to find anywhere."

Lilian looked pleased, but a little perplexed. "I am very glad," she murmured, wondering where the hitch was and why her advice was needed. But Miss Durnford, who was now properly wound up, proceeded in her usual discursive fashion.

"There is not a fault to find with her, and we have taken to each other uncommonly. Haven't we, Miss Cleveland? And though she has only been at the Dene two days, she has settled down as comfortably as though she had been there a year. I have given her the blue room, because it is next to mine, though Susan was in her airs about it, and there we are; and, as far as I am concerned, I am as content as possible. But there's

Miss Cleveland worrying herself, and me too, because she can't find enough to do."

"Oh!—I begin to see light," returned Lilian slowly. It was evident to her that Eunice was trying hard not to laugh, and that she did not venture to meet her eyes.

"She has been at me already half-a-dozen times," continued Miss Durnford, in rather an injured tone. "She wanted to help Susan with the mending, but I told her I daren't propose it to Susan; and as for touching the plants and flower-vases, or attending to the dogs, why, Rachel wouldn't stand it for a moment. I'd as lief meddle with Benton in the greenhouse or Mrs. Compton in the larder."

"The fact is, Miss Hilton," explained Eunice, but her eyes were dancing with suppressed mirth, "Miss Durnford has such excellent and well-trained servants that her companion has no scope. I cannot find out that there are any duties belonging to the post, and I shall earn my salary on false pretences. Now, being a conscientious person, this makes me uncomfortable; but when I hint this to Miss Durnford, she only says something is sure to turn up."

It was Lilian now who averted her eyes and whose lips were quivering, and it was quite a minute before she could steady her voice.

"I quite grasp the situation now," she began. But it was no use; the next moment both the girls had buried their faces in their handkerchiefs, and though Jem looked somewhat affronted at this unseemly mirth, she was obliged to join them. It was Lilian who recovered herself first.

"Dear, how badly we are behaving!" she exclaimed; "but Miss Cleveland's face set me off. But now I am quite serious, and we will try and find our way out of the difficulty. The fact is, Miss Jem, the blame lies at your door. When you engaged Miss Cleveland you ought to have explained to her very clearly that you did not need a useful companion."

"Now, whatever do you mean by that, Lil?" and Jem gazed at her in great perplexity. "It stands to reason, with Susan and Rachel always doing everything, that I could not want such a thing."

"Then you should have told her so, dear Miss Jem," returned the girl firmly; "instead of which you have brought the poor thing here on false pretences. She is quite bewildered at finding herself without any duties, and, of course, being a well-regulated, virtuous young person, she feels rather uncomfortable. Now," holding up her finger judicially, "did you, or did you not, spend the last two mornings in your store cupboard, Miss Jem?"

"Why, of course, my dear."

"Yes, I thought so, and this poor thing was left to wander about, and amuse herself as she could, and then she got a pain in her conscience, and began to worry."

"But, Lil," and there was unmistakable alarm in Jem's voice, "you know how I always spend my mornings. Why, I should not know myself if I had to sit in the morning-room stitching, and letting Miss Cleveland read to me," and quite a fretted look came into her eyes.

"My dear friend, who ever thought of anything so preposterous? Of course, no one wants you to alter your habits," and at this Jem's brow cleared like magic; "the whole thing lies in a nutshell. It is only for Miss Cleveland to understand exactly your definition of a companion, and what you really expect of her.

"Now, Miss Cleveland," with a bright, sympathetic look, "you must put your conscientious scruples in your pocket. Our dear friend here is delightfully vague and unpractical, as I told you, but I understand her perfectly. Disabuse your mind of any fixed and cut and dried duties: they don't belong to Miss Durnford's companion; but as time goes on you will soon find a hundred ways of making yourself useful to her. At present you are doing all she wants, by being a good listener and talker.

If you can take a hand at bezique, or read to her sometimes of an evening some interesting novel that will not allow her to go to sleep, or if you can play and sing to her," here Eunice nodded a cheerful assent, "she will think you the very pink and perfection of a companion; and we shall hear nothing but your praises from morning to night. What? you are not satisfied yet," with a keen glance at Eunice's face; "well, all I can say is, you are a very scrupulous and exacting person."

"No, I am not that, with a smile that Lilian thought charming. "I am only honest and want to earn my salary."

"And so you shall, my dear," and Jem put her plump little hand on the girl's arm; "you just wait, as Lil says, and you will earn it a dozen times over. There's *Villette* and bezique, and playing and singing, when that Mozley has sent the tuner, and by and by we will give a little party, and you will help me to that extent, that every one will envy me my companion; and there is one thing you can do, you can break me off that habit of saying 'lor',' which Lil is always trying to do, because she says it is vulgar. We will play the game of vulgar fractions, that we will, Miss Cleveland; every time I say 'lor', you shall bring me the box for the waifs and strays, and I will put a penny in, honour bright, I will," and Jem gave a hearty, childlike laugh, in which the girls joined; and it was in this merry mood that Douglas Hilton found them when at last he made his appearance.

CHAPTER X

MISS JEM AND HER FRIENDS

I pity you if in the circle of your home there is not some warm, loving nature which is your fire; your cold, dark candle-nature, touched by that fire, burns bright and clear. Wherever you are carried, perhaps into regions where that nature cannot go, you carry its fire and set it up in some new place.—PHILIP BROOKS.

THE white parlour was by no means lofty. All the rooms at Monkbarn were low pitched; the heavy cross-way beam made it still lower, and as Douglas Hilton entered, he looked so truly colossal, that for the moment Eunice thought that his head must have touched the ceiling, but this was merely an optical delusion on her part.

His features wore the solemnity that was their normal expression in repose, a certain calm passivity, which, as a friend once remarked, made him look like an unsociable Sphinx or a Buddha, but at the sight of the two ladies his face lighted up with unmistakable pleasure.

"Now I call this shabby, Lil," he said, with a glance at the empty tea-cups. "Here you have been enjoying your tea and scandal, and leaving me out in the cold."

"I knew Mr. Mitchell was with you," returned Lilian quietly, as she rang for some more tea, and cleared a place for him beside Eunice. "You have just come at the right moment, Douglas, when we had finished our discussion. Now I am going to talk to Miss Jem about the Sale of Work, and I shall leave you to amuse Miss Cleveland."

Mr. Hilton appeared quite willing to avail himself of the opportunity thus offered of making himself agreeable to their guest.

When they had discussed the weather, and a few ordinary topics, he proceeded to discover that Eunice did not play golf, and that she was sorely out of practice at tennis; but perhaps her most astonishing confession of ignorance, both to him and Lilian, was that she had never mounted a bicycle.

"I could not afford to buy one of my own," she had explained quite frankly, "and my brother did not care for me to hire one, as there was no one to ride with me."

It was at this point that Lilian interposed.

"Why should you not teach Miss Cleveland, Douglas?" she observed. "My old machine is quite good enough for a learner, and then we could have some nice rides together." Eunice coloured with pleasure at this delightful suggestion; she thought it was so kind of Lilian to propose it.

"I should like it of all things, if it will not trouble Mr. Hilton," she returned gratefully, "and if Miss Durnford can spare me."

"Lor', my dear," returned Jem cheerfully, "don't you be bothering yourself to ask me every little thing; make yourself happy, that is all I want. Didn't I tell you something would be sure to turn up, and here is this good fellow, Douglas, going to teach you to bike, as they say."

"Oh no, we never say it," interposed Lilian, who detested the word.

"Why should you not learn too," Miss Durnford?" asked Eunice innocently. Then she saw a glance of amusement exchanged between the brother and sister.

"No, no more biking for me," returned Miss Jem, with decision. "Last year Lilian gave me no peace until I tried; but they won't forget the lessons in a hurry. I was that terrified, that I screamed if Douglas let go of me for a moment. Nothing would induce me to mount one of those nasty things again. Young folks didn't use to ride on wheels in my young days, and now one can't walk in the lanes or cross a road without a

bell jangling in your ears, and some crazy body wheels past, looking for all the world like a mountebank, who is showing off a bit."

"Present company excepted, I hope," remarked Lilian, pretending to look affronted at this.

"Well, I will own that you and Douglas do it uncommonly well," returned Miss Jem, but she gave the praise reluctantly; "and there's Mrs. Pater and Araby, as spry and trim as possible; but to see some of the girls on Winter's Hill stooping over their machine, and working their feet as though they were on the treadmill, and their poor faces quite red with exertion, and making believe to enjoy it too, why, it just tires me to see them."

"Miss Jem is a little antiquated in her notions," observed Mr. Hilton leniently; "her education has been somewhat neglected, but you must try to infuse a few modern ideas into her mind. Well, Miss Cleveland, I shall be charmed to instruct you in the noble exercise of bicycling, and you and my sister must make your own arrangements." And then he added, "This is your first visit to Monkbarn, but I hope it will not be your last. I wonder what you think of the quaint old house?"

"It is charming," returned Eunice enthusiastically; "the Friars' Hall especially;" but again Lilian interposed.

"Miss Cleveland has not half seen the place, Douglas. I have just been telling Miss Jem that they must come over next week, and spend the day here, and then you can show Miss Cleveland the Knoll, and the farm buildings, and the dairy; and perhaps, if there is time and you are not busy, she might have her first bicycle lesson. Miss Jem is quite agreeable, are you not, dear?" turning to her with a coaxing smile. "There is nothing she likes better than spending a day out in the good old-fashioned way."

"You are right there, Lil," returned her friend complacently; "it is comfortable to take off one's bonnet, and to have a bit of knitting or crochet in one's hand

while one is talking. Those fly-away society visits never please me; it is how do you do and good-bye to you in a breath, and very often 'good riddance' too behind one's back. What is the comfort of eating cake, when your hostess is watching to see if the crumbs are not falling on the carpet; and the tea-cups are so thin that one might as well drink out of egg-shells."

"You like tea in the Friars' Hall or the white parlour much better, don't you, dear Miss Jem?"

"That I do," returned Miss Durnford, with empressement; "so if you are willing, Miss Cleveland, my dear, we will take Lilian at her word, and name next Wednesday;" and as this day suited the Hiltons, the appointment was made. They were to drive over an hour before luncheon, so as to allow plenty of daylight. Miss Cleveland was to be taken over the place before luncheon, and afterwards the bicycle lesson was to be given, "while Miss Jem has her usual forty winks," as Lilian added mischievously.

As soon as this matter was arranged, Miss Durnford remarked regretfully that it was getting late, and they must be going, and as Mr. Hilton left the room to give orders about the carriage, she observed casually, "I suppose you had your company yesterday, Lilian?"

"Do you mean the Paters?" asked the girl. "Oh yes, they came right enough, and to our surprise the Captain came too. What a nice man he is. I always say that when he has gone; but really he is one of those delightful people who always give you something to think about. He does not shut up his cleverness in a chest; he is always trying to make other people share his good things. Do you know," continued Lilian, "I used to be so afraid of him; I felt as though he were a moral policeman, and would pounce down on me and take me in charge, and I hardly ventured to speak in his presence; but now we are the best of friends."

"Are you, now?" returned Miss Jem, in a dubious tone. "Well, I must confess I am not a bit comfortable

with the Captain myself; it may be those eye-glasses of his, or the stiff way he bends his head and looks over his collar, as though he were miles above one, and had to stoop to look at you, but he flurries me so that I run my sentences into one another in the oddest way and make no end of mistakes, just as I did when I was a dunce of a schoolgirl and had to say my lesson."

"I wonder how Miss Cleveland will feel when she is introduced to him," observed Lilian, as they both laughed. "I think strangers always find Captain Pater rather formidable at first, until they know him better. Do you know, Miss Jem, it was such a lovely moonlight evening that Douglas went back with them and left his poor little sister alone with the friars."

"Don't you feel nervous when your brother is out in the evening?" asked Eunice; but Lilian smiled and shook her head.

"No, I am not a nervous person, and Nigger always stays with me," and at the sound of his name a recumbent black form in the window-seat slowly upheaved itself, "and we have no ghostly friars in the white parlour. Ah, here comes the carriage, and you must go."

The old hall looked rather weird and ghostly as they passed through it, for the red swinging lamp hardly lighted up the centre, and an army of shadowy figures might have lurked in the corners; but it was evident that Lilian had no superstitious fancies.

"We will have a fire in the hall on Wednesday," she remarked, in a matter-of-fact tone, "or Miss Jem will be grumbling at me." And then there were cordial adieus as they drove through the archway. Eunice looked back; the moon had risen above the old house, and she could see the porch alcove, with Lilian's dark figure within it, and just outside, with uncovered head and erect soldier-like figure, stood Douglas Hilton, with his hand uplifted in martial salute, a favourite form of salutation with him.

"It reminds me of a picture," she said to herself,

and more than once that evening she recalled that little scene: the silvery moon against the gables of the old house, the girlish form in the porch, with a red gleam behind it, and the grand figure of the young master of Monkbarn silhouetted against the brightness, as motionless as though it were graven in stone.

"Well, now, have you had a pleasant afternoon, my dear?" asked Miss Durnford, in the tone of one who is sure of a satisfactory answer.

"Indeed I have; I have never enjoyed myself more," replied Eunice. "I cannot tell you how much I like your friend Miss Hilton, and," with a slight hesitation, "I like her brother too."

"Ay, Douglas is a fine fellow," returned Miss Durnford, "and the young ladies make fuss enough about him; but he is one to know his own mind. I remember his telling me one day, years ago, half seriously and half in joke, that he would never marry until he found another Lilian. He is just devoted to her, and a better sister never was; she is as proud and fond of him as though she were mother and sister too. Sometimes she will sit and talk about him for the half-hour together."

"There cannot be much difference in their ages, I should think," observed Eunice, remembering the great disparity between herself and her brother.

"No, Lilian is just turned six-and-twenty, and Douglas is only two years older; but they might have been twins, to see how taken up they are with each other. I tell Lilian I always feel more lonesome when I have paid a visit to Monkbarn," and Miss Durnford heaved a gentle sigh.

"I understand what you mean," returned Eunice; and then she added thoughtfully, "I wonder what Miss Hilton would do if her brother were ever to marry."

"Oh, he will marry right enough," replied Miss Jem. "Douglas isn't cut out for an old bachelor, and he will make the best of husbands too, as I often tell Lilian. Why, we have talked of it scores of times, that we have,

and Lilian is such a sensible little creature that she will make the best of that, as she does of everything. 'Douglas says this will always be my home,' she once told me, 'and when he brings home his wife, I mean to love her dearly for his sake;' and she meant it too, every word, bless her."

"I am very fond of my sister-in-law," observed Eunice, with a sudden twinge of homesickness, as she recalled Lucia's sweet face; "she has always been so good to me. I never remember that she is not my own sister; but then I was a child when Shirley married. It will not come quite so easily to Miss Hilton, I am afraid; but perhaps she will have her brother to herself for some years yet."

"I am not so sure of that," replied Miss Jem quickly. "A little bird hinted the other day that we should hear something before long; but there, we had better be minding our business instead of listening to idle gossip," and to Eunice's surprise she changed the subject by wondering if they were not too late to dress for dinner.

Eunice, who had a girlish curiosity in such matters, felt rather disappointed at this unexpected reticence on Miss Jem's part; but she soon found out that, with all her garrulity and love of gossip, she never betrayed confidence or talked over her friends' affairs with other people; she might sometimes hint vaguely at a little bird, but she always pulled herself up directly.

As Eunice grew to understand her better she learnt to respect the tender, old-fashioned delicacy that was inherent in Jem's nature, and which, in spite of defective education, want of culture, and many errors of taste and judgment, stamped her with the undeniable impress of nature's gentlewoman. Miss Jem was so anxious about the time, that she got into a fuss at last, and when they arrived at the Dene, and Tommy and Baby had exhausted their first rapturous greetings, she proposed they should consult the drawing-room clock, and so

saying she bundled into the dusky firelit room, followed by Eunice.

"My dear Miss Jem, how late you are," exclaimed a crisp, staccato voice; "here Araby and I have nearly worn out our patience waiting for you," and lo and behold! there stepped out of the window recess the daintiest little person possible.

She was so diminutive that for the moment Eunice thought she was a child, and she was dressed like a little robin in furry brown and red; but when Rachel brought in the lamp Eunice found out her mistake, for the lady was not even in her first youth. She was a brunette, and had a bright piquante face that was wonderfully attractive, though it was not really pretty; but there was a gleam of mischief in her laughing eyes as Miss Durnford's countenance wore a look of vexed surprise.

"Lor', now, Mrs. Pater," she exclaimed, "it is like you to be masquerading in the dark; but whatever brings you here at this hour, when folks are thinking of their dinner? And there's Araby too," as a tall fair girl in a red velvet Tam-o'-Shanter stepped out of the same recess and stood beside her sister-in-law.

"Lor', now, haven't we caught you nicely, Miss Jem," returned Mrs. Pater, in naughty mimicry of Jem's tone and manner. It was so exact, so ridiculously like Jem, that Eunice could hardly keep from laughing. "What a healthy creature you are, my love; you always seem to relish your meals, don't you now, and long for them beforehand. Well, we don't mean to keep you from your dinner, do we, Arab? We have only popped in promiscuous like, to say how glad we are that you have come home in time for my birthday party."

"Botheration" was on Jem's brow and lips, but she prudently refrained herself.

"Now I should like to know how you found out I was back," she asked rather huffily. "You need not tell me that either Lilian or Douglas let the cat out of the

bag, for I should not believe you if you were to talk until you were black in the face. Didn't I tell Douglas that I was *incog.*?"

"Don't tease Miss Jem, Tina," interposed Araby; "why will you always rub her up the wrong way? There is no mystery about it," she continued, addressing Miss Durnford quietly. "Ian saw you and this young lady drive in the direction of Medfield; he was in Farmer Stoddart's barn, and of course you did not see him. He knew you had gone to Monkbarn, so Tina insisted that we should wait here for your return."

"I was determined to get my way," struck in Mrs. Pater, in her bright, defiant way. "'All comes to them who know how to wait,' I said to Araby, but she was in such a temper. Now what have you to say for yourself, you good-for-nothing, unneighbourly, unmannerly person; are you or are you not ashamed of yourself, that is the question, and do you, or do you not mean to make amends, by bringing yourself and this young lady to my birthday party?"

"It is only a whim of Tina's," observed Araby in a smooth, peace-making voice; "I never knew her to make a fuss about her birthday before; but we must give in to her, poor thing."

"Arab," observed Mrs. Pater reproachfully, "how can you have the heart to joke over such an awful event; are you aware that I shall be thirty-five to-morrow, and that I was never thirty-five before?" She took out her dainty little vinaigrette as she spoke and sniffed at it, as though her feelings had exhausted her, then she handed it solemnly to Miss Durnford, as though it were a snuff-box. "Shall we smell together?" she said sweetly, in much the same tone in which a clergyman says "let us pray;" "it will be the seal of our reconciliation. Oh, dear Miss Jem, let me whisper it in your ear, I found the first grey hair to-day, and I gave it to Ian for a keep-sake, because we've been married eleven unhappy years, and one day he may be a widower."

"Lor', Mrs. Pater, and whatever did the Captain say?" asked Jem, affected by this pathetic allusion.

"Well, he said, 'Lor', my dear,' too," and after uttering this barefaced fib, Mrs. Pater threw herself into a chair and burst into a fit of silvery and musical laughter.

CHAPTER XI

"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ARABY?"

Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.
—*King Lear.*

He is a fool who thinks by force or skill
To turn the current of a woman's will.
—SIR SAMUEL LUKE.

THE situation was comical to the last degree, but it was becoming somewhat strained. Miss Durnford quite understood that she was being mimicked to her face in the most unblushing manner, and though her dignity would not let her give herself away, she drew herself up with an affronted air, as though she were perfectly aware that Eunice was struggling vainly to hide her enjoyment of the scene. It was Araby who detected the storm signals, and tried to throw oil on the waters.

"Tina, how can you be such a baby?" she said severely; "I shall really refuse to go out with you if you behave in this ridiculous manner. Are you aware that it is seven o'clock, and Ian will be waiting for his dinner, while you are making Miss Jem quite cross with your impertinence?" Then Mrs. Pater rose out of her chair with the impetus of a miniature whirlwind, and cast herself bodily on her ill-used neighbour, treating her to pecking, bird-like kisses on either cheek.

"My dear creature, don't listen to Arab; she is quite venomous sometimes. You are not a bit angry with your poor little Tina, are you? Don't you know what the good book says, that we are to heap coals of fire on our enemy's head. I did think it so cruel of St. Paul to say that, and he was such a gentleman too; for it must have been so excessively painful to the poor things,"

and here Mrs. Pater folded her tiny hands and looked at Miss Jem with the guileless air of a child. "We pile up our coals differently in the nineteenth century; we take them meta—meta—how do you finish it," with a delightful little stutter. "So you will introduce me to this pleasant-looking young lady, will you not, and remember I shall expect you both sharp at eight to-morrow?"

"Well, of all the wilful women," ejaculated Miss Jem; "but I suppose you will have your way. Dear me, I thought I had named Miss Cleveland to you, but I must have clean forgotten it. Shall you be having many people, Mrs. Pater?"

"Not more than the room will hold comfortably," returned the little lady, with a grand air. "Now, Arab," rather sharply, "why are you dawdling in this fashion, when you know how late it is?" But Araby merely smiled in a somewhat inscrutable manner, as she shook hands with Miss Cleveland and followed her sister-in-law out of the room.

Eunice had been watching her intently during the last few minutes; the girl curiously attracted her.

She was not at all pretty, indeed, most people thought her plain, the Pater family not being remarkable for good looks.

Her colourless complexion and fair hair gave her a washed-out appearance; she looked anæmic, and far from robust, but dark blue eyes, and remarkably long curling lashes relieved the neutral tints. Her figure was extremely graceful, and she was dressed in rather a picturesque fashion; her red velvet Tam-o'-Shanter gave her the colour she needed, and some soft dark fur about her throat exactly suited her. In spite of her absence of beauty, she was certainly a very striking-looking person.

"Well, now," observed Miss Jem, in a tone of relief, as the door closed, and she threw off her hat and jacket in her usual unceremonious fashion, "we will just get a

bit of dinner, for Mrs. Compton will be in such a taking about the fish." Then, as Rachel was in the room, nothing was said about the visitors, until they were cosily established by the drawing-room fire and sipping their coffee.

"Well, what do you think of Araby, my dear?" asked Miss Jem, rather curiously; "I won't try to find out your opinion of that fly-away little Tina, as they called her; but her name isn't Tina at all, but Floris, only she refuses to answer to her christened name, and so they are forced to give in to her. Oh, she is a wilful madam is Mrs. Pater."

"I found her very amusing, and I don't think there is any harm about her," returned Eunice; "she is just mischievous and like a kitten. She is very original. I never saw any one like her before."

"I should think not indeed," Miss Jem spoke in an emphatic manner, "and I will say that kittens of thirty-five are not to my taste. White hairs indeed, I should think the Captain has plenty by now, for it takes all his time and Araby's too to keep her within bounds. She is more like a firefly than a woman, I tell her; but there, it is a pity she has not children to sober her. Well, I ain't going to talk of Mrs. Tina just now, for she has put up my back as usual. I would only like to know if you have taken a bit to Araby."

"Yes, I think so," in rather a hesitating way; "but I certainly admire her, she is such a graceful person."

"You would say so if you saw her dancing," returned Miss Durnford; "it is just beautiful to watch her. But to my thinking she shows off best on horseback. I have often met her in the lanes riding with the Captain; her blue habit just sets off her figure, and she and her mare Jessie look as though they were part of each other, like those queer people one reads about."

"Centaurs," murmured Eunice.

"Ay, Centres, so they are—what a memory you have, my dear! Well, I can't say I admire her myself. I

never did care for that sort of pale complexion, and somehow her eyes and hair don't seem to match; of course the poor thing can't help it, being made so, but it gives her an odd appearance."

"She somehow attracted me," returned Eunice thoughtfully; "she is very uncommon, so different from other people. Is she clever, Miss Durnford?"

"Well, I suppose so; she comes of a clever family; the Paters have plenty of brains. I prefer ordinary people myself," continued Miss Jem, "they are so much less fatiguing. I never can quite understand Araby; she talks in such a hide-and-seek, catch-whom-you-can sort of fashion, that one cannot be even with her. I never know myself whether she is serious or jesting; I don't believe she knows herself half the time. Anyhow, she is not my sort, and Lilian is worth a hundred of her."

"Oh, yes, I prefer Miss Hilton too, she is such a genuine, lovable sort of girl; I felt at home with her the first moment. Miss Durnford, do you think there will be a great many people to-morrow? I could not quite understand Mrs. Pater when you asked her about it."

"I daresay not," returned Miss Jem in a withering tone; "if you expect to get a straightforward answer to a question from that quarter you will find out your mistake. You never can be up to her tricks. She may have asked the whole neighbourhood to-morrow, with a band and a pastry-cook supper (she did that once), but she would never tell you; or she may only have a dozen of the dowdiest old ladies in Disborough—her tabbies, as she calls them. I tell you what, Miss Cleveland, my dear, we will just put on our best bibs and tuckers, and then we shall be ready for any emergency."

"I am afraid I cannot be very smart," returned Eunice quietly. "I have only a white cashmere dress, which is rather the worse for wear; but with a fresh tucker and a pair of new gloves——"

"Oh, you will do beautifully," interrupted Miss Jem.

"Young people always look best in white; and as for gloves, I have boxes and boxes full, and enough lace and chiffon to stock a shop-window. I always get my trimmings in London; and then Susan can freshen up my dresses. We will turn over my store to-morrow morning, and you shall help yourself to anything you want. I shall wear my eau-de-nil satin myself. It is a bit smart; but as I often say to Susan, what is the good of having dresses if they are always in one's wardrobe? and it is new-fashioned, and very becoming, and Mrs. Pater's tabbies will be sure to admire it."

As Miss Durnford seemed so bent on attiring herself gorgeously, Eunice did not venture to dissuade her, though she secretly thought it would have been more in accordance with good taste to wear something less startling; still, she was diffident in expressing an opinion unasked, and perhaps, after all, Miss Durnford might be right, for the notion of a band and a pastry-cook supper was somewhat alarming. When Eunice went to her room she took down the white dress and looked at it somewhat anxiously. Lucia had coaxed Shirley to buy it for her three years ago, when a friend of theirs was giving a dance. It had looked very fresh and pretty that night; but she had worn it several times since then, and it certainly had seen its best days. The idea of fresh lace and chiffon from Miss Durnford's store comforted her a little, and she determined to put the whole matter out of her mind and to go to sleep, and she very soon carried out this good resolution. Her dreams were a little mixed, however, for she thought she was playing hide-and-seek in a strange garden with Lilian and Araby Pater, and that Araby refused to be caught; she could see the red Tam-o'-Shanter everywhere—behind rose-bushes, and peeping over privet-hedges. Just before she woke she imagined she had her safely penned up in a corner behind an old water-butt. "You cannot escape me now," she heard herself saying, but a mocking voice in the distance seemed to answer her. To her

dismay, she was holding Douglas Hilton's arm, and he was smiling down on her in an amused fashion. In her confusion she woke outright. What a very odd dream! she thought, but it seemed so real somehow, and more than once she recalled it during the day.

Eunice spent quite a delightful hour in Miss Durnford's dressing-room turning out her hoards of finery. The number of her gowns bewildered Eunice, who seldom had more than one new one in a year. Miss Jem was fond of dress; she liked brilliant colours, rich textures, and the newest fashion; and she had a harmless fancy, too, for keeping her old gowns, and owned to it quite frankly.

"Susan is always at me for keeping my old frocks," she said, as she hung up a red merino rimmed with velvet. "Now, I know as well as possible that I shall never put on that merino again; it is as old-fashioned as it can be, and it don't suit me; but I am loth to part with it, because father always liked me in it, and so he did in the blue satin, and that spotted silk. It isn't that I am miserly, my dear, for I would give all the clothes off my back if I thought people needed them, but I have a sort of affection for my old gowns. I like to take them down and look at them, and think of the times I wore them, and how I enjoyed myself. Why, they are like pictures to me," continued Jem, smoothing out tenderly a cinnamon-coloured silk, which struck Eunice as remarkably ugly and unbecoming. "Now, I wore this at my first garden-party at the Vicarage. Father was with me, and it was that day we made the acquaintance of Lilian and her brother—not that she liked the dress, for she told me afterwards that I looked fifty in it."

When Eunice went back to her room she was laden with spoil—things that Miss Jem had pressed upon her: a pair of silk stockings, and a handsome petticoat all flounces and embroidery, half-a-dozen pairs of Paris gloves, and yards of lace and chiffon. The day was

fine; and as Miss Durnford wanted a walk after luncheon, Dorcas was established in the blue room under Susan's direction, and the fresh trimmings were entrusted to her.

"She is a handy girl, and has plenty of taste," observed Miss Jem, as they sat down to luncheon, "and I daresay she will make a good job of your frock. You can ask Benton to cut you some of those red chrysanthemums, and then you will do famously. Araby is a great one for wearing flowers—she is never without them of an evening."

Eunice was charmed at the idea of a walk, but she was rather surprised when Miss Jem proposed that they should go down Birdhurst Lane towards Brocklebank and call at Honey Hanger.

"I may as well ask Betty for some more eggs," she observed, "for our hens ain't laying just now;" but this excuse was too transparent to deceive her young companion. She knew it was only curiosity that took Miss Jem to the cottage.

The visit was not a success. Betty was cleaning her kitchen, and was not in the humour for visitors. She was deafer than ever, and even shouting in her ear was ineffectual. Jem was quite red in the face before she could make the old woman understand her errand.

"Eggs; yes, sure you can have some and welcome, Miss Durnford," she returned. "How many will you be wanting? A dozen. Ay, I can spare that much; but Mr. Desmond and Billy they eat a sight of eggs. Billy mostly lives on 'em."

"You are speaking of your lodgers," returned Miss Jem eagerly. "Who is Mr. Desmond, Betty? Is he an artist?" but Miss Jem had to repeat this question half-a-dozen times before Betty could grasp her meaning.

"Mr. Desmond took my rooms seven weeks ago come Saturday. He said the place suited him; he wanted country air for the boy. No," when Jem had screamed another question, "I know nought of the gentleman,

except that he pays regular, and gives little trouble. An artist, did you say? Well, I never asked him. My lodger's affairs ain't my business. Sometimes he is painting, and other times he is writing or reading, but I know no more than that. He is out now, and so is Billy, or you might have found out for yourselves by asking him;" but whether Betty said this in simplicity or malice was impossible to say, but Miss Jem seemed rather taken aback.

"Nonsense, Betty," she said, quite sharply for her; "why do you suppose that I should want to poke and pry into your lodger's concerns just because I ask a question or two? Well, we will not hinder you any more. I will send for the eggs this evening," and Miss Jem gave Betty a curt nod and walked away.

"Disagreeable old thing," she exclaimed, as they turned into the lane, "she is always as deaf as a post on her cleaning days, but it is my belief she can hear if she chooses. One would think her lodgers were stuck with gold or diamonds, she keeps them so close. There was that pretty widow, Mrs. St. Clair, who was at Honey Hanger for more than a year. Well, then, there was a queer story about her; not that I am going to repeat it, for it is none too pleasant, but old Betty never could be got to say a word. As long as her lodgers pay her she thinks they are all right."

Miss Jem was so evidently ruffled by old Betty's deaf obstinacy that Eunice thought it wise to divert her mind a little.

They were still in Birdhurst Lane, and were close to the picturesque corner which she had described so enthusiastically. There was the rocky wall half covered with wild creeping plants, with the tiny thread-like stream below it; in front of them were two gates, one leading into a long green field, and the other into a wide pasture, bounded on the one side by arable land, and on the other by a tiny wood.

"Will you wait for a moment while I gather those red

leaves?" she asked, looking longingly up at a festoon that hung a little above her reach. "I can easily climb up that bank."

"Now, if Lilian could only see you," observed Miss Jem admiringly, as Eunice swung herself down the next moment, and trailing the coveted branch behind her. "I thought only a goat could have got a footing there—but bless me, what was the good of picking all those withered leaves!"

"The good! Why, they are just beautiful," returned the girl indignantly. "Look, dear Miss Durnford, there are some blackberries, and all those hips and haws; oh, if Lucia could only see it! How I love the country!—the real country, I mean—this seems to me quite paradise after Langton Green."

"You don't say so—well, now, to think of that!"

"Langton Green was not a bad place," went on the girl, turning her bright young face to her companion. "It was pleasant to look out on the green and the trees, and then we could always walk to the river; but the streets and alleys seemed to hem one in, somehow—one longed for real lanes and meadows, and wild copses, and to pick wild-flowers and blackberries, and—what was that?" stopping suddenly in her rhapsody.

"It sounds like a child crying," returned Miss Jem uneasily; "down by the copse there, and there is a dog barking too," catching up the Blenheim spaniel as she spoke. "You look after Tommy, Miss Cleveland, for he is such a one to fight as never was;" and tucking Billy under her arm, Miss Jem trotted down the long meadow as fast as her legs could carry her.

CHAPTER XII

"DO COMPANIONS HAVE NO NAMES?"

I never have any pity for conceited people, because I think they carry their comfort with them.—GEORGE ELIOT.

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
—*Macbeth.*

THE sounds seemed to proceed from the long meadow, though as far as Miss Durnford and Eunice could see there was no one in sight; but by the time they were half-way down it they came to a thick clump of bushes, behind which a great unwieldy retriever puppy was frolicking with a child's straw hat, taking short runs round it, and then pouncing on it and worrying it as though it were a rat, and rending the air with shrill barks of delight. On the other side of the ditch a little boy stood crying; he was in evident terror of the great black creature, and filled with anguish at the loss of his headgear; the tears were streaming down his little pale face, and his chest heaved with sobs. "Go away, go away!" he kept screaming, "and don't eat Billy's hat."

"I have got your hat, darling," exclaimed Miss Durnford in a soothing voice, as she snatched it from the puppy. "Oh, don't cry so, my dear little man; the naughty dog has not eaten it, you see," and here Miss Jem scrambled quite nimbly through the dry ditch, and put her arm round the sobbing child. "Look here, dearie," she continued coaxingly, "the tiresome fellow has only just nibbled the brim a little. He is a big baby, and does not know better, but he is really a nice, good-tempered puppy."

"Billy don't love him," returned the child fretfully, and swallowing down another sob. "Billy was only playing coach-and-horses with the bushes, and a great black thing jumped out on him and barked, and the wind blew Billy's hat away. Billy hates big black doggies."

"What a pretty little fellow!" exclaimed Miss Jem tenderly, and a soft, motherly look came into her eyes as she stroked the fair, curly head. "Look, dear, what fun he and the little white dog are having," for the puppy was chasing Tommy all round the meadow, and every now and then tripping himself up over something or other; but Billy was not to be diverted from his woe.

"It was Billy's best hat," he returned with a fresh outburst of tears. "Daddy will be angry, and say Billy is a naughty boy."

"Oh no, darling, it was only an accident," returned Miss Jem, gathering him tenderly in her arms. "No one will think of scolding you when it was all the puppy's fault." But to her surprise Billy's face looked as lugubrious as ever.

"Dad will whip Billy, because he was a naughty boy, and wore his best hat, which dad put away in the cupboard, and Billy was naughty," with a precocious nod of his head. "Listen, lady," looking up into Jem's kind face with tear-laden eyes—"it was high up in a box, and Billy got on a chair and a stool and tooked it out."

"But why, my dear little fellow? it was really very naughty of you." Then Billy hung his head.

"Billy wanted to wear his best hat, because he was gentlemans driving coach-and-horses, and so dad will scold Billy dreffully," and here the child buried his face on Jem's shoulder.

"Hullo, what is the matter, Bill, old fellow?" exclaimed a deep, musical voice, and the next moment a dark, slight man emerged quickly from behind the bushes.

No one had heard footsteps, and for a minute both the ladies were too much taken by surprise to explain

matters. The puppy and Tommy were rolling over and over each other, and Eunice was breathlessly trying to divide them with her sunshade. Jem, who had seated herself on a heap of dry leaves, had the child still in her arms, and, to use her own expression, was too much flustered to say a word.

"What are you crying about, Bill?" continued the newcomer calmly; "and why are you troubling these good ladies?" Then Miss Jem cleared her throat rather nervously as she volunteered her information; perhaps the stranger's quizzical eyes and calm air of aloofness added to her embarrassment.

The child had been frightened by the retriever puppy, who had pounced out on him from behind the bushes, and had run off with his hat; they had found him in deep distress and evidently much terrified, and were trying to comfort him. There was really not much harm done—here her hand hurriedly covered the frayed brim. Miss Jem, who was not sure of her ground, spoke in a flurried tone.

"Billy has been a naughty boy, dad," exclaimed the child timidly, as she paused from sheer want of breath.

"I do not doubt it," returned the newcomer in rather an impassive tone. "Come here, Bill," holding out his hand, as the little fellow advanced with manifest reluctance. "Heads up; no whining and nonsense. Why, at nearly six years old you ought to be ashamed of snivelling like a charity schoolgirl. Come, that's better; you look a different Johnnie now," as the boy raised his eyes with rather a frightened expression and fixed them on his father's face.

"So that ridiculous puppy frightened you, did he?"

"Yes, dad."

"Silly Billy—well, you shall shake hands with him presently, and then you will be friends. Somehow it strikes me that it was your Sunday hat that the rogue was trying to demolish when this kind lady rescued it."

"Your little boy is very sorry," broke in Jem in an

imploring voice; "he has done wrong, he knows it, but I am sure you will allow me to intercede for him."

"Ladies are privileged people," returned the stranger in rather a cynical tone. He was an exceedingly handsome man, with an uncommon type of face, and looked about thirty; his tweed suit was well made, though a little worn; and he had the voice and intonation of a gentleman. Eunice especially was struck by the clearly cut profile and pale olive complexion, and expressed her opinion afterwards that there was something foreign in his appearance. "He is almost too handsome for my taste," she objected, "and there is something cold in his expression; his eyes were almost unpleasant in their keenness, they seemed to read one through and through."

"Nonsense," returned Jem irritably. "I never saw a handsomer pair of eyes in my life. They are darker than yours, Miss Cleveland, but they are the real Irish grey for all that. He is Irish, too; his card told us that. Keefe Desmond! Why, it is quite a romantic name."

"He seems rather out of the common altogether," agreed Eunice, "but I am not sure I like him. Billy is not a bit like his father."

"Perhaps he takes after his mother," returned Miss Durnford. "You heard him imply she is dead;" and as Eunice nodded, "Well, it is an adventure, and anyhow we know more about Betty's lodgers," in a triumphant vein, "than she does. I daresay Mr. Desmond is a stern sort of man—perhaps he has known trouble,—but with all his hardness he is fond of his child."

"Perhaps, yes, I daresay; but all the same, Billy is afraid of him. I could see in a moment how the child seemed to dread his questions. Poor little fellow, I felt quite sorry for him."

"Lor', my dear, it was only his quizzing, clever way of talking," returned Jem, who had been much struck by the stranger's good looks. "He was quite good-natured at last, and really it was very naughty of Billy to go to the cupboard and get down his best hat."

The examination of the culprit had been brief but thorough.

"That was your best go-to-meeting hat, was it not, Bill?"

"Yes, dad."

"You climbed up on a chair and got it from the shelf in the cupboard, though I said you must never wear it except on Sundays?"

Silence on Billy's part.

"What do disobedient boys generally get from their fathers—eh, Bill? especially when they are poor and can't afford new straw hats?"

Billy's chest heaved with emotion, his little pale face twitched.

"Do—do forgive him this time," exclaimed Jem earnestly. "Boys will be boys, you know, and I am quite sure Billy will never disobey you again. We are neighbours," continued Jem rather incoherently. "At least, I live at the Dene, that is close to Birdhurst Lane. My name is Durnford; every one in Shepperton knows me."

"My name is Keefe Desmond. May I offer you my card?" handing it with rather an inscrutable smile. "No one in Shepperton knows me. My little boy and I are staying at Honey Hanger Cottage. Our landlady has her virtues, though she is as deaf as a post." Then with a marked change of voice, "You may be thankful, Bill, old fellow, that we have such kind neighbours to intercede for you." Here he flashed a quick look at Eunice. "Well, well, as I said before, ladies are privileged people, so we will say no more about your Sunday hat. We will spare the rod and spoil the child, in spite of Solomon," and at the relenting tone Billy suddenly sprang to his father's neck and hugged him.

"That's my dear old dad," in a tone of ecstasy,—"my good, goodest dad."

"I am not so sure of that, Bill," with a short, unmirthful laugh. "I have an idea that bad rhymes with dad. What emotional creatures children are, and especially

motherless children! Don't you think we have had enough of this sort of thing, Bill, my fine fellow?" disengaging himself from the boy's clinging arms, "and that it would be more to the purpose to kiss the hand of that kind lady?"

Miss Durnford evidently thought this a figure of speech, but greatly to her surprise the child advanced, and in a graceful, high-bred way bent over her shabby glove—Jem always wore shabby gloves when she took country walks, it was her pet economy;—but before the boy's lips touched it she was kissing him with tears in her eyes. "Oh, you darling!" she said under her breath, for Jem was a child-lover, and her great warm heart had plenty of room for the little ones.

Mr. Desmond did not appear to be moved by this scene. Very probably this ordinary little person with the smart hat and sandy fringe did not interest him, being an artist and having the true artistic sense of beauty; but more than once his eyes rested approvingly on Eunice's fresh, girlish face.

"I presume that your name is Durnford too, and that you also live at the Dene," he observed easily; but Eunice, who was not attracted by their new acquaintance, rather resented this question.

"I am staying there at present," she returned stiffly. "I am Miss Durnford's companion." Then an unmistakable look of amusement crossed Mr. Desmond's face.

"Do companions have no names?" he remarked softly, and Eunice flushed at the cool impertinence of his manner—it was intolerable. What business had a mere stranger to inquire her name? Perhaps Mr. Desmond felt he had gone too far, for before she could reply he summoned Billy in a quick, peremptory voice. "Come, Bill," he said, pick up your hat and don't loiter, Betty's dinner will be spoiling. Good-day, ladies," but he looked at Jem as he spoke. "A thousand thanks for your kindness to my boy. As we are neighbours, I trust we shall meet again;" and then, taking Billy under one arm,

he lightly leapt the ditch with him, and the next moment had disappeared behind the bushes.

Miss Durnford would have followed, but Eunice begged her to wait a moment. "If we walk slowly there will be no fear of our overtaking them," she observed, and Jem agreed rather reluctantly.

But the little adventure had quite excited her, and she could talk of nothing else. Billy was a perfect darling, she remarked again and again; she had lost her heart to him the very moment she had seen his dear little face. And as for Mr. Desmond, with a furtive glance at the card she held, he was the handsomest man she had ever set eyes on. Douglas Hilton could not hold a candle to him.

"I prefer Mr. Hilton's face myself," returned Eunice, who was not to be cajoled into any enthusiasm about the stranger.

"Lor', Miss Cleveland, my dear, what makes you so stiff?" exclaimed Miss Durnford reproachfully. "Why, the man is a perfect Apollo. If Araby had seen him she would have raved about him for a month, and so would Mrs. Tina. We are alike in that," continued Jem, with a conscious little laugh. "We have a weakness for good-looking men."

"I do not deny for a moment that Mr. Desmond is a striking-looking person," returned Eunice quietly, "and most people would admire his classical features and dark colouring; but I dislike his expression, it is cold and cynical; and he poses too much—you may depend on it he thinks far too much of himself."

"Well, you are hard to please," observed Jem rather impatiently. "He is a gentleman, though he may be poor; and one could see that tweed coat of his was cut by a West End tailor, though it was a bit worn at the seams. Did you notice how frayed his cuffs were? It is easy to see that he has no wife to look after his things. Billy had got a great hole in his sock."

"You seem to have noticed a great many things,"

replied Eunice, with an amused look. "I was far too busy driving off the puppy to observe much myself. I wonder where it belonged?"

"Oh, to that cottage facing Birdhurst Lane," rejoined Jem carelessly. "I know the Allens have a retriever. Well," with an astonished look at the hall clock, "we are late—not that it matters, as we are dining early to-day, and to-morrow too. I told Compton that we were sure to have a grand supper. They have a famous cook at Chez-Nous. Compton often gets hints from her."

Jem was in a talkative mood, and as soon as her hunger was appeased she began afresh. Eunice had a secret fear that Betty Prior's lodgers would soon be thorns in her side, but no want of interest or sympathy on her part could damp Jem's excitement and curiosity.

"I wonder what sort of food Betty gives that child?" she observed presently, as Rachel placed a tempting-looking pudding before her mistress. "People of her class have no notion of milk-puddings and light nourishing diet. Ham-and-eggs, and a fowl now and then, would be her notions, with a chop or a suet-dumpling when it came handy. I used to know the Blakes," she continued, "when they lodged at Honey Hanger; they were really nice people, only they had lost their money. The Paters called on them, and I used to ask them to dinner once a week regularly. I shall never forget little Mrs. Blake saying to me, with tears in her eyes, that they looked forward to the Dene dinner the whole week. 'It is ham-and-eggs, and bacon-and-beans day after day,' she went on, 'with a dish of greasy chops or a skinny fowl thrown in as a treat, and however my poor husband would live with his weak digestion and small appetite without——' there, what am I saying?" continued Jem, getting very red. "'Look at your words before you speak them, Jem,' mother used to say, and she was right."

"Shall I finish your sentence for you?" returned

Eunice, laughing. "Oh, I know quite well what Mrs. Blake said." There were hampers sent to Honey Hanger as well as weekly dinners, fruit and vegetable, and nicely cooked little dishes to tempt sickly appetites. "Oh, you dear woman," shaking her head at her, "I begin to know you now."

"Lor', my dear, don't make such a fuss about a trifle," returned Jem in great confusion; "the Blakes were good friends of mine, and I missed them dreadfully when they went abroad; he was one of the nicest men I ever knew—good gracious, Miss Cleveland, how you startled me! What in the world is that for?"

"A penny for the waifs and strays, please," observed Eunice, offering the box, her eyes twinkling with mischief; then Jem gave one of her loud merry laughs, and promptly paid her fine.

"Pity the sorrows of a poor companion," sighed Eunice, as she replaced it in a conspicuous place. "At last I have discovered a duty, and that an obnoxious one, but it is all in the day's work. Dear Miss Durnford," as Jem with a radiant face rose from the table, "one word before we part—no hampers to Honey Hanger Cottage under the present *régime,* not even if they only contain ginger-snaps for Billy." Then as she looked Miss Durnford full in the face Jem blushed rather guiltily.

"Why, of course not," she returned hurriedly. "What an idea! But Eunice was not at all sure that some such thought had not passed through Jem's mind.

"She is dreadfully incautious," she said to herself as she went into the morning-room. "I was wise to nip it in the bud. She is nine-and-thirty, and she has no more knowledge of the world than I have—not as much, I fancy. Why need she have told that man that we were neighbours? She was far too friendly, and he presumed on it at once. 'Do companions have no names?'—it was rank impertinence." And Eunice grew hot all over as she recalled his tone.

CHAPTER XIII

CHEZ-NOUS

Would she put on this garment gay,
  I durst swear by my seill,
That she wore never green nor grey,
  That set her half so weel.
—ROBERT HENRYSON.

ALTHOUGH Eunice was three-and-twenty, she looked much younger, and the very narrowness and monotony of her life in her brother's household had preserved her youth and freshness.

Her pleasures had been so few that she had enjoyed them with a zest that many girls of her age would have envied. An evening spent with some old school-chum; or, rarest of all treats, when one of Shirley's patients had sent him a couple of stalls for the theatre or a box for the pantomime at Christmas: these had been red-letter days at the End House, and had furnished Lucia and herself with a week's entertainment.

The hard-worked doctor would look over the heads of Daisy and the three boys, and rest half tenderly and half amused on Eunice's bright face. "She enjoys it as much as Cecil and Jock," he said once to his wife on his return. "Really Eunice is not a bad-looking girl. When she is animated and has a colour she is quite pretty. But I know somebody—eh, Luce?—who would have put her in the shade." Then Lucia dimpled and blushed very prettily under her husband's admiring eyes.

Eunice felt quite excited when she went up to her room to dress for the evening at Chez-Nous. The very uncertainty and mystery that enshrouded the birthday party added to her anticipations of pleasure. There

was something novel and exhilarating in the doubt whether a dozen uninteresting old ladies, and round games, or a ball supper and a cotillon, would be the entertainment of the evening. Of course Eunice would have preferred the latter. She loved dancing, and was considered no mean partner by the youth of Langton Green. And as Eunice coiled her abundant brown hair in a most becoming fashion, she wondered if Mr. Hilton danced well.

On the whole, she was agreeably surprised at her own appearance. Miss Durnford's chiffon and ribbons made her dress look quite fresh; her gloves were beautiful, and the dark-red chrysanthemums and maidenhair suited her exactly. She entered Miss Durnford's room with an air of modest elation, but the sight of Miss Jem standing before the pier-glass almost took her breath away.

"Oh!" she gasped, in such evident astonishment that Susan, who was kneeling on the floor arranging the folds of her mistress's train, smiled sourly to herself.

"Fine feathers make fine birds, missy," she said grimly, as she rose to her feet; "but a goose is a goose for all that, and there is no turning him into a peacock, if you try ever so. There, Miss Jem, I have put your dress right, and you look fit for the Lord Mayor's banquet."

"Susan thinks I am too smart," observed Miss Jem, regarding herself complacently. "What do you say, Miss Cleveland?"

"I never saw you look so nice," returned Eunice, in a tone of such sincerity that Miss Jem quite blushed with pleasure. "Of course the dress is smart and very handsome too, but the colour just suits you." And Eunice was right: the soft tint of the eau-de-nil satin harmonised with Jem's sandy hair, and toned down her high colour. The dress was cut square, and showed a plump white neck and round throat to great advantage. But Eunice's look of admiration changed to one of dis-

may as Miss Jem took up a heavy gold necklace set with rubies.

"Oh, not that!" she exclaimed hastily. "You will spoil the whole effect if you put on that necklace. Please wear this instead," handing her a thin gold chain with a beautiful little diamond star attached to it.

"That old thing!" observed Jem contemptuously. "What is the use of my having heaps and heaps of jewellery if I don't wear any? There's my set of turquoise and pearl; and my sapphires and diamonds are real beauties—even Mrs. Pater says so."

"Yes, but you do not need jewellery to-night," returned Eunice, who was determined not to let Jem overload herself with ornaments. "I am quite sure Susan agrees with me."

"I always agree with people who talk sense," returned that excellent female testily. "My goodness, Miss Jem, what is the use of having a young lady from London if you don't abide by her advice?" and then, with a regretful glance at the necklace, Jem reluctantly yielded.

"Well, now, if I ain't forgetting that I have got a present for you, Miss Cleveland!" she remarked the next moment. "Where is that fan, Susan? There, my dear, take it and welcome. I bought it at Brussels ever so many years ago, and I never used it more than twice."

"Oh, Miss Durnford, how kind! but it is far too beautiful for me," and Eunice gazed at the treasure with sparkling eyes. "I had a fan once, but I broke it, and it would not mend; but it was only a cheap one."

"Oh, I gave a good deal for that," returned Miss Jem as she buttoned her gloves. "I was rather flush of money, father had just sent me a cheque. Well, I am glad you like it." Then she looked at a bracelet and hesitated. "If you care to wear any of these things, you have only to say the word, my dear—a brooch or bracelet, or that pearl necklace." But Eunice shook her head.

"Oh, no," she replied quickly. "I do not care to wear ornaments unless they are my own; thank you awfully, Miss Durnford, but indeed I would rather not." Then Susan gave an approving grunt.

"I never hold with borrowed finery myself either," she remarked. "But most young folk would deck themselves like a heathen Chinee if they had the chance. In my opinion," her rough voice softening, "Miss Cleveland looks just as she ought to look—and those are my sentiments."

"Well, you are right, Susan, she does look nice," returned her mistress. "Now, if you will bring my ermine cape, we will go down to the drawing-room and warm ourselves. Well, Rachel, what is it?" as the parlour-maid appeared at the door. "The carriage ought not to be here for another ten minutes."

"No, ma'am; but there is a gentleman in the hall who wants to speak to you or Miss Cleveland," returned Rachel in her quiet, precise way; "leastways he did not mention her name, only the young lady would do if you were engaged. He said you would know his name—Mr. Desmond; but as I never set eyes on him before, I would not put him into the drawing-room."

"Then put him there at once," returned Miss Durnford with unusual peremptoriness, "and tell Mr. Desmond that we will be with him directly." And as Rachel withdrew rather astonished at her mistress's abruptness, Miss Jem gave a little girlish giggle.

"Whatever will he say to see us dressed up so?" she observed, but in so low a tone that Susan did not hear her. "I wonder what has brought him round at this time in the evening. I hope there is nothing wrong with Billy."

"We had better go and see," returned Eunice sensibly; and at this hint Miss Jem bustled down the corridor. Mr. Desmond was standing before the fire when they entered; he started perceptibly as Jem swept into the room in her satin gown. For the moment he

did not seem to recognise her; then he glanced quickly at her young companion, and the perplexed look was replaced by a strangely vivid smile.

"You are going out," he observed abruptly. "A thousand apologies for this ill-timed visit, but I was anxious to restore this article which I believe must belong to one of you ladies," and Mr. Desmond produced a small pencil-case and handed it to Miss Durnford.

It was a shabby little thing, not even silver; but some one had scratched E. C. on it.

"This must be yours, Miss Cleveland, my dear," observed Jem, who had half-a-dozen of gold and silver pencil-cases, and would not have owned such an article for a moment.

"Oh, yes, thank you," returned Eunice quite eagerly; "the boys gave it me on my last birthday, and Jock spoilt it by scratching these initials; but I would not have lost it for worlds," and for the moment her manner was more genial. "I am very sorry to have given you so much trouble," she continued, feeling that she must overlook his impertinence, in return for his good-nature.

"Oh, it was no trouble at all," he observed pleasantly. "I always have an evening prowl when Bill is in bed. I am afraid I shall shock you, ladies, but to the masculine temperament a pure, unadulterated diet of childish imbecilities becomes rather a weariness to the flesh."

Miss Durnford's blue eyes opened widely at these paternal sentiments.

"Oh, dear me," she exclaimed rather piteously, "I should not think any one could get tired of Billy; he is such a sweet, engaging little creature."

"Oh, you are true to your sex," smiling at her; "but as I have no wish to pose as an indifferent parent, I will modify my speech. It is not my own special Billy I mean, but Billy in the abstract. Children are charming, no doubt—at times they are amusing; but one may have too much of a good thing, and occasionally," with a slight curl of the lip, "Billy's bedtime is a distinct relief."

"I think I see what you mean," returned Jem, but her kind face clouded a little; "children need a deal of patience, as scores of mothers would tell you, and as he has lost his, poor lamb—— but there, why am I not offering you a seat, Mr. Desmond? you will think we have forgotten our manners." And as their visitor shook his head, "We are just waiting for the carriage to take us round to Chez-Nous, that is where the Paters live."

"Captain Pater is a thin, rather solemn-looking man, with a dark moustache, is he not?" asked Mr. Desmond; and as Jem nodded, "No, I have never spoken to him; but I often see him riding with his daughter."

"Bless me, Araby is his sister," returned Miss Durnford hastily; "he has no chick or child of his own; but she is ten years younger than the Captain. She is a young-looking creature; but she is eight-and-twenty if she is a day," and Jem plumped herself down in an easy-chair, and pointed invitingly to one on the other side of the fireplace, but again Mr. Desmond shook his head.

"Many thanks, but you must not tempt me, dear madam," and he glanced round the cosy room with rather a melancholy expression. "You cannot imagine what a paradise this looks after Honey Hanger. I feel rather like Lazarus when he looked on at Dives feasting, or any other poor beggar out in the cold. Bill and I have known little of ladies' society lately."

"I am sure," began Jem, clearing her voice a little nervously, "that we shall be glad to be neighbourly and all that." But here Eunice interposed.

"The carriage is coming round," she said hurriedly, "and we are already ten minutes late." Then Jem jumped up in a flurry.

"Good gracious! so we are, and I promised Araby that we would be punctual;" but as she stretched out her hand for the ermine cape, Mr. Desmond was before her.

"Let me make myself useful," he observed as he placed the regal-looking garment round the plump little figure.

"Miss Cleveland, where is your wrap?" But Eunice, who guessed his intention, had already swathed herself in a grey woollen shawl. But, nothing daunted by this repulse, he handed them into the carriage, and stood bare-headed in the portico until they had driven off.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Miss Jem in rather an awestruck voice; "what grand manners Mr. Desmond has, to be sure! He looks like a prince in disguise, too, in that dark cloak; he is handsomer than ever this evening." Eunice thought so too, though she would not have owned it for worlds. On the contrary, she observed rather coldly that he was too theatrical-looking for her taste.

"It is a pity to be too friendly with him," she went on; "for, dear Miss Durnford, after all we know nothing about him." But this sensible speech was received by Jem in rather bad part.

"Dear me, Miss Cleveland," she returned pettishly, "how very stiff and proper you are! how are we to know a person until we see more of him?"

"I think we ought to have some reference or introduction," replied Eunice steadily. "We might find out if any one in Disborough or Shepperton knows Mr. Desmond; why don't you ask Captain Pater or Mr. Hilton about him, or perhaps your vicar?"

"Oh, our vicar is a young man, and is too fussy, and has too many strings to his bow to visit as much as he ought; but the archdeacon or his curate, Mr. Brookes, might find out something about him," for Jem was a little impressed in spite of herself by her young companion's decided manner.

"I'll have a talk with one of them when I get a chance," she went on. "Not that there is any fear. Betty's lodgers are always respectable folk, and I have been on visiting terms with more than one of them; but here we are," as they turned into a dark drive. "You must jump out first, Miss Cleveland, and for mercy's sake don't catch your dress in the door."

Captain Pater's soldier-servant received them, and a

handsome ayah in Indian dress took off their cloaks in the hall. She was Mrs. Pater's personal attendant, and had nursed her mistress in a dangerous illness, and had become so devotedly attached to her that she had begged to accompany her to England. Lalla, as she was called, was a privileged and much-valued retainer at Chez-Nous, and her picturesque dress and innumerable bangles were regarded with looks of admiration and awe by the Shepperton children; the "Injun Princess," they called her.

"I don't believe we are so late after all," observed Miss Durnford in a loud whisper as the man ushered them into the drawing-room. A blazing fire and two small lamps on brackets on either side of the mantelpiece only lighted the upper end of the room; the rest was veiled in obscurity, until a heavy plush curtain was drawn back and revealed a small inner room, brilliantly lighted up, with three people cosily seated round the fire, and two others kneeling on the rug, evidently roasting themselves and chestnuts together.

In a moment all were on their feet, and Mrs. Pater, looking extremely young and girlish in her black evening-dress, came up to them with extended hands.

"Many happy returns of the day, Miss Jem," with a light, pecking kiss on each cheek, "and the same to you and many of them, Miss Cleveland. I am of such a benevolent disposition," she continued blandly, "that I always extend my birthday privileges to all my friends. May I introduce my husband to you? Ian, this is a great day in Shepperton; we have actually the pleasure of seeing a new face."

Captain Pater smiled slightly as he shook hands with Eunice; he was evidently well used to his wife's speeches. He was a tall, thin man, but looked every inch a soldier; his features were plain, and he and Araby were not the least like brother and sister. But to Eunice his quiet, gentlemanly manner prepossessed him in her favour. At first sight he might seem formidable, but she soon

discovered for herself that he was both clever and agreeable. Araby, who always wore white in the evening, looked a little colourless beside her sister-in-law. Her fair hair and dark hazel eyes were certainly an uncommon combination; her figure was exceedingly graceful, and she had beautiful hands and arms that a sculptor would have loved to model. She wore no ornament of any kind except a cluster of white waxy-looking stephanotis. The next moment Eunice was exchanging friendly greetings with Lilian and her brother; Lilian's face was flushed, and she put up her hands laughingly to her hot cheeks.

"We always roast chestnuts on Mrs. Pater's birthday," she explained, "but that sinful brother of mine has made a perfect cat's-paw of me, so I am not fit to be seen. Douglas, I smell burning!" But as Mr. Hilton turned a deaf ear to this remark, Lilian, with a pretended frown, knelt down on the rug again.

"Ian, wheel up that easy-chair for Miss Jem," observed Mrs. Pater briskly. "Miss Cleveland, there is room in the cosy corner for you and Araby; now this is what I delight in, a quiet fireside circle. Dear me, Miss Jem, have I seen that dress before? It is just lovely; and it fits you like wax." Then she put her hands to her skirts and dropped a charity-girl's bob in mock humility. "To think of the likes of that, Arab; here's Miss Jem put on her beautiful Bond Street satin gown to do honour to my birthday-party."

"I thought there were more folk coming," returned Jem gruffly, for Mrs. Pater had been too much for her again. Poor Jem! her lovely dress, the glory of her wardrobe, suddenly became obnoxious to her as she thought of Susan's triumph over her discomfiture. "Didn't I tell you so, Miss Jem?" she could hear her say. "Well it is a pity, for they will have the laugh against you, and I don't wonder at them." Jem felt ready to cry at the thought of her own foolishness, and Mrs. Pater's unneighbourly ruse; and there was the

malicious little creature standing before her, looking as demure as possible, and enjoying her own mischief.

"It is just sweet of you," she went on, "and I am as grateful to you as though you had brought me a present; there's Araby wanted me to have a musical party, or a dance; but no, I said to her, I have come to a crisis in my life at thirty-five; half one's life is over, and it is a duty to consider one's latter end." And Mrs. Pater sighed as she uttered this beautiful sentiment.

"This is why I have put on my oldest black gown, and have only invited my special friends to-night, dear Miss Jem; you see my birthday circle. This evening we roast chestnuts and enjoy the feast of reason and the flow of soul; we ask riddles that no one guesses, and tell ghost-stories that curdle one's blood; before we separate, some light refreshment in the shape of sandwiches and negus. Why, Araby, what now?" But the next moment the garrulous little lady was quietly put aside and Araby took her place.

"Never mind her nonsense, Miss Jem," she said kindly. "We shall never cure her of her absurd tricks. If Ian and I had not been in the dark ourselves I would have given you a hint; but until two hours ago we both thought the Archdeacon and Miss Prescott were coming, as well as the Whitelaws and the Macaulays. I know Lady Olney and Sir Ralph were invited; but the fact was, there were so many refusals that Tina got in a pet and put the other people off, only she would not tell either of us. So please do not mind," continued Araby, with a charming smile. "It was very kind of you to put on your pretty gown, though there are so few of us to admire it." And this good-natured speech so far healed Miss Jem's wounded spirit that she was soon guessing conundrums and laughing at her own failures in quite her old way; though she did whisper once in Eunice's ears that she wished they had had their dinner as usual, for she was so hungry that a good square meal would be more to her taste than sandwiches and negus.

CHAPTER XIV

"I KNOW YOU, MISS JEM, MY DEAR"

Love and Heaven
Are the only gifts not bartered;—
They alone are freely given.
—A. A. PROCTER.

Happiness is a great love and much serving.
—RALPH IRON.

MISS JEM'S annoyance and embarrassment were so painfully evident to her young companion that for some minutes Eunice sat in troubled silence, until Lilian, under the pretext of handing her a hot chestnut, whispered quietly:

"Don't take any notice. Araby will soon put things straight. Mrs. Pater is in one of her teasing moods because she is disappointed of her guests, and must vent it on somebody. There, I told you so," as Miss Jem brightened up perceptibly under Araby's soothing treatment, and nodded to them quite cheerfully. Then aloud, "Take this other chestnut, Miss Cleveland; it is cooked to perfection, and I am not going to burn my face or my fingers any more. Mrs. Pater, where is that box of Paris chocolate? We must have prizes for the best conundrums. Sit down, good people, and lend me your ears," she continued merrily, "for I have a brand-new one coined just fresh from the mint of my own clever brains and stamped 'A 1.'" Then, displaying the tempting-looking sweets as she spoke, "A chocolate-cream and two preserved violets for the best guesser." After this the fun waxed loud and furious.

Eunice said afterwards that she had never enjoyed herself so much in her life. "It was the most delightful

evening I ever spent," she continued sincerely. "I think I never met more charming people." And Miss Durnford's face beamed in response.

"Well, there is some pleasure in taking you out," she returned in a gratified tone. "If there is one thing I like, it is seeing people happy. I am glad, that I am, that that little minx of a madam took such a fancy to you. 'You may bring that nice Miss Cleveland as often as you like to Chez-Nous, for she is a perfect dear.' Those were her very words."

"I am glad of that," returned Eunice cheerfully. But as she recalled the events of the evening by her comfortable fireside, she said to herself how happy she would be if she might call Lilian Hilton her friend.

"I have only seen her twice, but I quite love her," she went on. "She is so truthful, so sincere, so unfeignedly sweet-tempered. Araby is nice too. One cannot help admiring her. She is so graceful and picturesque, and makes such quaint, amusing speeches. And she is good-natured. She was as kind as possible to poor Miss Jem, and would not let Mrs. Pater tease her. I wonder" —here Eunice propped her elbows on her lap and stared into the fire—"I wonder why she was so stiff and standoffish to Mr. Hilton. She never went near him or spoke to him if she could help it, and yet she was as pleasant as possible to every one else. I saw him looking at her once or twice as though he could not make it out, and Miss Jem noticed it too."

"Araby was a bit huffy with Douglas to-night," she had observed during the short drive home. "Oh, she is an airified young woman when she likes, and she does not always treat her beaux civilly."

A short silence, then Eunice asked, in a careless voice and as though stifling a yawn, "Is Mr. Hilton one of Miss Pater's admirers?"

"Mercy on us, don't ask me!" returned Miss Jem in rather a flurried tone. "Most of our gentlemen admire Araby. She is not a beauty, and in my opinion

her hair and eyes are the oddest match possible; but she has got a taking manner, and can turn them round her little finger, as the saying is. They pretend to laugh when she gives herself princess airs, but they are drawn on for all that."

Eunice ruminated over this speech, and wondered afresh. If Miss Jem were right, if Douglas Hilton was one of Araby's beaux, as Miss Jem had expressed it in her homely parlance, he was a somewhat lukewarm admirer, for that evening he had talked far more to her than to Araby. Indeed, Eunice did not care to acknowledge, even to herself, how much the pleasure of the evening had been due to Mr. Hilton. He had squeezed himself into the cosy corner between her and Araby, and had generously shared his prizes with both ladies. But when Captain Pater had told his stock stories of the Mad Fakir, and the ghostly black hound who had haunted their compound, and who had turned out to be a thieving Hindoo crawling on hands and feet, and Araby had gone to the piano and invited Lilian to join her in a duet, Mr. Hilton had not followed them. He sat still in his corner and talked in the friendliest way of the time when he and Lilian were children, and how her youthful ambition had been to sing like Christine Nillson.

"She really has a beautiful voice," he continued, "though, poor girl, she has never had Miss Pater's advantages. Mother never could bear the idea of her studying in London, and so Lil lost her chance."

"What a pity! Oh, please, hush!" as a sweet, thrilling note floated through the room. But if Lilian's solo was faultless, the blended harmony of the two girlish voices was simply perfect. Tears rose to Eunice's eyes as she listened, and even Miss Jem seemed spellbound.

"Oliver asks for more," observed Mr. Hilton as the clapping of hands ceased. "At least, these are Miss Cleveland's sentiments, which we all endorse." Then, after a brief parley, another duet was sung, and then

another. But at this stage of the evening's amusement supper was announced, and Captain Pater offered his arm to Miss Jem.

Jem's glance at the well-spread supper-table would have amused her hostess if she had seen it; but she was engaged at that moment in scolding Douglas, who refused to behave properly and lead his hostess in. The altercation ended by the four ladies walking in double file, with Mr. Hilton bringing up the rear in solemn dignity, like a gigantic policeman. But happily she was in time to hear Jem's speech.

"Whatever did your wife mean, Captain, with her sandwiches and negus?"—for the boned turkey and champagne were far more to Jem's taste.

"My wife refused to countermand the supper she had ordered for eighteen people," returned Captain Pater resignedly. "It is a noble bird, is it not, Miss Durnford? but I am likely to renew my acquaintance with it for many a day to come. Floris, my love"—in the blandest of voices, but Mrs. Pater did not turn her head —"I drink to your health, my dear, and to the accumulated wisdom of your thirty-five years. Few women would have been so clever," he continued, addressing Miss Jem. "Here has our economical and thrifty housekeeper got in her whole stock of provisions for the week, not to mention the turkey, on which five-and-twenty hungry people could have satisfied their appetites, but we have pigeon-pie, chicken-pasty, and galantine of veal, and——"

"Ian," remarked his wife severely, "if you say another word I will leave the table. Eat your supper, do, and leave speeches for afterwards. There are to be no toasts but one—'The best-dressed woman in the room.'" And then they all laughed; and, to Miss Jem's confusion and secret delight, Mrs. Pater bade them fill their glasses, and then they all looked at Miss Jem and bowed; and Douglas, who was bent on mischief, clamoured for a speech in return.

"Oh no, no! How can you, Douglas?" exclaimed Lilian, quite distressed. But she was too late. Miss Jem was already on her feet.

"Well, now," she said, with a little simper of satisfaction, like a child who has put on its best bib and tucker and feels good in consequence, "it is no use your poking fun at me, Douglas, for I know no more than a babe unborn how to make a speech. But you are all very kind, and I have enjoyed my supper, and I hope, Mrs. Pater, my dear, that you will give us as good a one for the next five-and-thirty years." ("Hear, hear," from the two gentlemen.) "I will just take the liberty of thanking our good hostess for the nice compliment she paid me, and I hope that we shall be the best of friends, and that no more unneighbourly tricks may be played on me." (Here "Order, order," from Douglas.)

"No, I ain't going to hold my tongue until I have had my say," went on Miss Jem with a good-natured nod at him. "Mrs. Pater has praised my gown, but I won't tell a fib and praise her manners in return, for she ain't done quite the proper thing—have you, Mrs. Pater?" and Jem's blue eyes were a little reproachful. Then, to every one's surprise, Mrs. Tina suddenly rose from her chair and flung herself on Miss Jem.

"Oh, you dear thing," she said breathlessly, "I have been a nasty little brute, that I have, and you are a perfect angel—if angels ever wear eau-de-nil satin! Hold your tongue, Ian; I can read your thoughts, that I can. I will tell you all about it after supper, Miss Jem, dear;" and actually, in the big dimly lighted drawing-room, Jem, in much bewilderment, listened to the oddest confession: how she (Tina) and Araby had had a bet that Jem would wear the new Bond Street gown, and how at the last moment Araby had repented and wanted to rush round to the Dene and tell her that they were only a family party.

"But I would not let her go," went on Mrs. Pater in a contrite voice. "Of course it was naughty of me, for

we could easily have sent the gardener; but why was I to lose all my fun?"

"There, say no more about it, for pity's sake," implored Jem, who felt she had had about enough of it; and then Mrs. Pater, with another reconciling kiss, jumped up and seated herself at the piano.

"I am going to play a waltz, Araby," she said meaningly. "Ian, you may as well ask Miss Cleveland to have a turn with you," and the next moment two couples had taken the floor.

Captain Pater danced well, but Eunice, who was out of practice, soon got breathless and a little giddy; but as she sat on the dark window-seat her eyes followed Araby and Douglas Hilton.

"You should see her dance," Miss Jem had said to her, and indeed it was the very poetry and rhythm of movement—a little languid, perhaps, but exquisite in its undulating grace. It was evident that she and Douglas Hilton had been partners before, for their steps seemed in perfect unison. As they passed the nook where she sat a few words reached her ear. "You have no right to take such fancies"—it was Douglas who spoke, then the next moment Araby's hand no longer rested on his arm. "I am tired," she said abruptly, and she looked so, quite pale and drooping; "it is silly of Tina to make us dance after supper, but she will be so contrary. Miss Cleveland, are you tired too, or will you have my partner?" But Douglas Hilton drew back with a slight bow.

"After-supper dances are a mistake," he returned coolly. "I don't advise you to trust yourself to my guidance, Miss Cleveland." Then Eunice, feeling vaguely disappointed, and perhaps wondering what was amiss, coloured a little and looked at her fan; the next moment she put it into Araby's hand.

"Miss Durnford gave it me this evening," she observed; "is it not lovely?"

"I thought I had seen it before," returned Araby; "I was admiring it; but of course I remember now, Miss

Durnford bought it at Brussels years and years ago. I recollect she got it in the Rue de la Madeleine or the Montagne de la Cour—oh, those shops! Ian was almost in despair because he could not induce us to move on. Do you know Brussels and Antwerp, Miss Cleveland?"

"I have never been abroad," returned Eunice frankly, but the confession cost her a slight effort. What would Miss Pater think if she knew that Margate and Hastings and Seaford had been the only places she had ever seen, and that Langton Green and its environs, with an occasional jaunt to Kew or Richmond, had been her ordinary limits?

To the home-bred girl Shepperton seemed a different world, and the smallest events of everyday life at the Dene were full of excitement. Eunice felt all at once very small and insignificant as she made her little statement; but though Araby opened her dark eyes rather widely, she was too well-bred to take any notice of the girl's remark.

"You have all your pleasure to come," observed Mr. Hilton in quite an envious tone; "we are *blasé*, are we not?" with a glance at Araby, "and even Swiss mountains pall on me;" but Araby only shrugged her graceful shoulders and made no answer, and the next moment Jem came up to them with the announcement that the carriage had arrived.

Both Captain Pater and Mr. Hilton attended them to the door, and at the last moment the latter let down the carriage window. "Don't you forget next Wednesday, Miss Jem," he remarked, "and mind you put on thick boots, Miss Cleveland, if you mean to climb up the Hill Meadow," and with this parting advice Douglas Hilton went back into the porch.

"He is a good fellow," murmured Miss Jem in an affectionate tone, as she drew up the glass again. "My word, it is cold to-night, there is a touch of frost in the air; that shawl of yours is not warm enough, Miss Cleveland, my dear; we must find something else for

you," and before Jem slept that night she had hunted out a silk fur-lined cloak, which she had discarded in favour of her smart ermine cape. "It is really as good as new," she said to herself; "Susan thought me quite wicked when I bought the ermine, but what is the use of saving one's money when one has only one's self to consider," and here Jem sighed a little heavily.

"I daresay I am extravagant," she went on presently; "but there, we all have our besetting sins, as the Archdeacon told us last Sunday; and if mine is buying pretty things when I see them, well, where's the harm, I should like to know? and after all, they are bought with father's money. Next time we go out, Miss Cleveland shall wear that cloak; the white fur will just suit her, and Susan need not know that I have not lent it to her—that reminds me that we will go over to Shelgate on Monday or Tuesday," but here Jem grew so drowsy that she deferred all the remainder of her benevolent schemes until she had had her night's rest. Never was there a busier brain, or a kinder heart, than Jem Durnford's. "If only she had a husband and children of her own," Susan would say to herself sometimes, "for she is that full of loving-kindness that it brims over and runs to waste for want of proper objects to spend it on. It goes to my heart to see her with children," and here Susan's rugged face softened strangely; "when she looks at the pretty dears, there's just heart-hunger in her eyes. Oh, folks don't know Miss Jem as I do," continued the faithful creature; "she is so chatty and pleasant that they think she has got all she wants, but I know different; if she could have fancied them that fancied her, she would have been a happier woman, to my thinking. There was that young Lawson," with a frown of recollection; "a decent young chap he was, too, and cared for Miss Jem ever so, and she only turned up her nose at him; but for all that he would have made her the best of husbands. I daresay she was right about the others," continued Susan, "and that they cared most

for her money, though she was downright sharp to find it out. Don't I remember her, poor lamb, coming to me in such distress, when she had sent that Jack Rawlinson about his business, and he was a fine figure of a man too.

"'It is no use, Susan,' she said, crying a bit with the worry; 'I can't fancy him in spite of his fine speeches; it is not me he wants, it is dear old dad's money; but he shall never be master of it, or me neither.

"'I am a bit lonesome, Susan,' she went on, 'now father has gone, but I will never marry unless I can care for some one with all my heart. It is better to be lonely than miserable, is it not, Sukey? then give me a kiss, you silly old woman,' for I could not help crying myself to hear her, and then she laughs and runs off, but I knew her poor heart was sore.

"Well, well," finished Susan, as she put the finishing touches to the dress she was trimming, "folks call her an old maid now, though she is not turned forty yet, and her heart's as young as ever; but to my thinking she had been safe if she had listened to Robert Lawson's courting; for if any unscrupulous man were to get a mastery over her, with an eye to her fortune, and she were to believe him, and care for him in good earnest, the whole of Shepperton might try to turn her in vain—oh, I know you, Miss Jem, my dear, and a more reckless, loving-hearted little creature never lived, as sure as my name's Susan Maitland."

CHAPTER XV

MONKBARN

Money spent in making one's home pleasant seems to me the most sensibly and usefully laid out of any other, for it attaches one to home, amuses one, and does good to those about one, and particularly gives one a cheerfulness and content which no other kind of amusement does so well.—LADY SARAH BUNBURY.

THE expedition to Shelgate was fixed for Tuesday; but as Miss Durnford was a little mysterious on the subject of her shopping, Eunice was unable to gratify her curiosity. It was not until they were in the train that Jem offered the least explanation.

"I have to see the bank manager first," she said in a businesslike tone, "and then I shall look in at my lawyer's about that lot of pasture-land he wants me to sell, and after that we will go to the 'Rose and Crown' and get a bit of luncheon;" and this part of the programme was duly carried out.

After luncheon they went into a linen-draper's, and Miss Jem bought some domestic articles in the shape of dusters and tea-cloths; then, to her companion's surprise, she entered a large toyshop in Market Street.

"I am going to buy something for little Billy," she said rather hurriedly, "and it must be something nice, too; I don't believe he has a decent toy in his possession. Do you remember that scarecrow of a horse in the front garden, with no mane or tail to speak of? and there was a broken drum, too—it went to my heart to see them."

Eunice was rather taken aback by this, but she dared offer no remonstrance, for it was evident to her that a toy for Billy was the chief purpose of their journey to Shelgate.

So she made sundry suggestions with as good a grace as she could muster, but Miss Jem rejected them all; neither tops, whips, swords, nor tin soldiers were to her fancy, and Eunice was aghast at her extravagance when her choice fell on a miller's-cart, heaped up with snow-white sacks, and with two fat horses gaily caparisoned, and with handsome manes and tails.

It was undoubtedly a costly toy, and such as any child might love; the horses were covered with skin, and had little tinkling bells over their heads.

"There, I think Master Bill will like that," exclaimed Jem, who was delighted with her purchase. "Andrew shall take it round to Honey Hanger first thing in the morning; Billy would not sleep a wink if he saw it to-night. What are you looking so serious about, Miss Cleveland?" and there was a touch of sharpness in Jem's voice; but Eunice only coloured a little, and said meekly that it was a charming toy, and of course Billy would be pleased.

"Billy's father will be pleased too," she said to herself; "he will be calling at the Dene again; but there, it is none of my business," and then Eunice's thoughts strayed to the nursery at the End House. Hairless and mangy horses were to be found there too. What would Lot have said if that wonderful miller's-cart had come to him?

Jem was in high spirits all the remainder of the day, and talked incessantly. Eunice, who was a little tired from all the novelty and excitement, would have liked to go on with her novel, but Miss Jem could not be induced to sit still for a moment. She was bustling in and out of the room most of the evening, and holding lengthy conversations with Susan and Mrs. Compton.

"We are going so early to Friars' Farm that I must give my orders over-night," she observed by way of apology for her unusual restlessness. When Eunice knew her better she found out that all Jem's harmless little jaunts and trips were always prefaced by a good

deal of fussy preparation. The household were expected to take an interest in their mistress's movements, and even the new tea-cloths and dusters were fingered and criticised by each maid in succession before Susan finally carried them off to mark and put away in the well-filled presses. Susan was not present, however, when Andrew had his orders to put the cart in the harness-room until the morning. A little ticket with Jem's sprawly handwriting was addressed to Master Desmond, but on the other side was written, "To dear little Billy, with Miss Durnford's love."

"I do hope we shall have a fine day," were Eunice's parting words that night; and to her delight she woke in a gleam of October sunshine.

There are some days in every one's life which deserve to be laid up in lavender and placed in the snuggest corner of one's mental storeroom, or strewn with sweet dry rose-leaves—days which even to the memory distil a faint, far-off fragrance. The old sun-dial at Friars' Farm expressed this sentiment—*Horas non numero nisi serenas,* "I only note the sunny hours;" or, as Lilian preferred to translate it, "I never count the hours which do not bring me peace."

"What a lovely idea!" observed Eunice thoughtfully, as she and Lilian lingered beside it late in the afternoon.

The day had been one of perfect enjoyment to Eunice; not a moment had dragged, not a single hitch had occurred all these hours, from the moment of their arrival to this pleasant twilight stroll with Lilian; there had not been a minute that she would not willingly have lived through again, and yet how rarely one can say this! It had seemed to her as though both the brother and sister had vied with each other in trying to give her pleasure; they had shown her everything—the garden, the dairy, the poultry-yard, and even the cattle-sheds and granaries; and Nancy, the rosy-cheeked dairymaid, "the queen of curds and cream," as Douglas called her, had given her a lesson in butter-making. They could

hardly induce Eunice to leave the dairy, so entranced was she with the big cool place, with its great shallow pans of yellow cream, and the rolls of golden-tinted butter; its long latticed window, with a few late-blooming roses tapping against the panes. Then there was the egg-room, and Lilian's storeroom that put Miss Jem's to shame, and the apple-loft; and when Eunice had exclaimed and admired and praised to her heart's content, Miss Jem went into the white parlour to rest, and Lilian and Douglas took Eunice to the top of the Hill Meadow to see the view.

Eunice was a good walker, but the meadow was steep and the little sheep-path was full of stones and ruts, so she was glad to sit down on a piece of jutting rock and recover her breath; and then she listened with intelligent interest while Douglas Hilton pointed out the various landmarks.

"I am so glad you are pleased with Monkbarn," he said, as they came down the path again; "most people think it a picturesque old place," and Douglas's tone had a trace of pride in it, for every inch of ground was dear to his heart.

"It is the loveliest place I have ever seen," returned Eunice seriously; perhaps, after all, this artless little speech was hardly the compliment that Douglas Hilton seemed to consider it, as Eunice had only seen very ordinary farmhouses. "Oh, how you must care for it!" she continued, turning her bright face to her young host; "what it must be to wake up morning after morning in this beautiful place!" and Eunice, whose bedroom window at home commanded a limited view of the water-butt and some neighbouring windows, certainly spoke with feeling.

The sound of a gong summoned them indoors; and as air and exercise had made Eunice exceedingly hungry, she did full justice to the excellent dinner that Lilian provided. After a desultory chat in the hall, where a great fire was burning cheerily, Miss Jem settled herself

in an easy-chair for her forty winks; and the bicycle being brought out, Eunice had her first lesson in the lane, Douglas holding her in her seat, and Lilian walking beside her with encouraging words. In this way another hour passed swiftly. Then Douglas, remembering that he had to see the cow-doctor, ran off in the direction of the cattle-sheds, promising to be back by tea-time.

"Do not let us go indoors yet," exclaimed Eunice, as Lilian led the way to the porch; "I am not tired, and it is so delicious out here," and then they sauntered on arm-in-arm round the pond, and down a trellis walk to the sundial.

It was certainly an ideal evening. There was a pink sunset glow behind the old house, and a tiny crescent moon peeped over the firs; the steely gleam of the water in the big pond reflected the faint light, and only the distant bleating of a sheep on the Hill Meadow, or the sleepy twitter of a bird, broke the stillness.

"I should think most of the hours are peaceful here, Miss Hilton," observed Eunice, remembering the inscription that had so taken her fancy. Then Lilian pressed her arm gently.

"Why do you call me Miss Hilton?" she said quietly; "I am always Lilian to my friends. Oh, I know our acquaintance is very recent," as Eunice seemed surprised, "but I am a very unconventional person, and it seems so absurd for girls to stand on ceremony with each other."

"I will willingly do so, if you will drop Miss Cleveland," replied Eunice in a gratified tone. "I know my name is not as pretty as yours; it is very funny and old-fashioned, but it was my mother's name."

"Do you know, I rather like it," returned Lilian, "and so does Douglas; he declares it just suits you. Do you know its meaning?—'happy victory.' I call that rather nice; it sounds as though you were to conquer in the battle of life, and not be crushed and beaten."

"That's not so bad," observed Eunice. "I must tell Lucia that—'happy victory.' I am afraid Miss Durnford's Jemima—oh, what an ugly name it is!—will not come off with such flying colours."

"You are wrong," replied Lilian, smiling. "Jemima means a dove, and certainly our dear Miss Jem has one of the gentlest natures I know; it takes a great deal to make her really angry, and even then she is ready to forgive at the first word. That reminds me, Eunice—there, I am setting you a good example,—how are you getting on at the Dene? do you find any scope yet for your energies?"

Eunice shook her head. "Not at present, I am afraid; but, all the same, I am enjoying myself awfully. I never had such a good time in my life. I try to turn my leisure hours to account," she continued seriously. "I have planned a course of useful reading, and I am going to make a whole set of flannel shirts for each of the boys—Lucia is to cut them out. I know what a help it will be to her."

"That is your brother's wife, is it not?" asked Lilian; "it must be delightful to have nephews and nieces of one's own. I know I shall spoil mine dreadfully; not that I am in a hurry to give up my sisterly monopoly of Douglas, but one must face the future. I shall take you as my pattern, Eunice," and then they both laughed, and Lilian said they must really go in and look after Miss Jem.

"Just once more round the pond," persisted Eunice in a coaxing voice; she had suddenly remembered there was something she wanted to say. "Lilian, do you or Mr. Hilton know anything of a Mr. Desmond, who is lodging at Betty Prior's cottage in Birdhurst Lane?"

"Oh, you mean that handsome artist whom Douglas calls the Apollo Belvidere," returned Lilian; "he has certainly a beautiful face. Yes, he asked leave to sketch Monkbarn, and the arch; and Douglas brought him in to luncheon one morning; we thought him a gentleman

and rather clever, but we neither of us cared much for him."

"That is how I feel," returned Eunice; and then she gave Lilian a brief account of their meeting with Mr. Desmond. "I should not give the matter a second thought," she went on, "only Miss Durnford has taken such a fancy to little Billy that I am afraid we shall be drawn into an acquaintance. Miss Durnford is so confiding and unsuspicious, but I have learnt worldly wisdom from my brother. I think Mr. Desmond is the sort of man who would presume on a slight acquaintance; his manner seemed to me a little offensive, and yet in some ways he seemed well-bred."

"I know what you mean exactly," replied Lilian, charmed at this good sense on Eunice's part. "I am not at all sure that Douglas would approve of Mr. Desmond visiting at the Dene. There he is," as a tall figure approached. "Douglas, we want to ask your opinion," and then she gave a brief *résumé* of their conversation.

"I don't know anything about the fellow," observed Mr. Hilton; "one can give a luncheon to a stranger at the gate without exchanging visiting-cards. I thought him a good-looking chap, and he certainly knew how to talk, but he was not quite to our taste, was he, Lil?"

"No; but we could neither of us give any reason, I remember," returned his sister; "and oddly enough, Douglas, Miss Cleveland feels just the same."

"He seemed so cynical and *blasé*," observed Eunice, "and his manner gave one the strangest impression as though he were on guard and defending himself. I am expressing myself badly, but he was certainly not at his ease."

"No, I saw that too," returned Douglas; "evidently he is down on his luck, poor beggar. Don't you remember, Lil, when you were showing him those sketches of the Priory, that he said he remembered staying at a place very like it in his youth? 'Friends and guineas were

not so scarce then,' he said; and though he laughed as he spoke, he was evidently in earnest."

"Could you not find out more about him?" pleaded Eunice; "I am so afraid——" but here she stopped as though she were guilty of disloyalty to Miss Durnford.

"Oh, you need not be afraid of saying anything to Douglas," exclaimed Lilian, "he is so fond of Miss Jem; but he knows her little foibles, and often lectures her on her imprudence. Miss Jem always thinks it is her duty to be neighbourly with Betty Prior's lodger. I remember we met some rather vulgar people once at the Dene, Mrs. Orpington and her daughter, but Miss Jem was quite infatuated about them. She found out her mistake, though, before they left; why, they borrowed money of her, and Blanche Orpington actually carried off a handsome brooch and bracelet that she declared Miss Jem had given her, but it was downright robbery. Don't you ever let out that I told you about the Orpingtons, Eunice, for Miss Jem is so ashamed of the whole thing that she never alludes to it."

"Well, I will try and find out about the artist," observed Douglas. "I always consider Miss Jem is under my special protection—hullo, here she is," as the door opened in the porch and Jem's fair frizzy head protruded in a perfect halo of ruddy brightness.

"Whatever are you people doing with youreslves?" asked Jem in a shrill, reproachful voice; "here I am quite tired of my own company, and there's such a tea as you never saw set out in the Friars' Hall." Then the girls hurried in with laughing excuses, and Douglas followed them, but both he and Lilian were amused when Eunice stopped short with an exclamation of delight.

"Oh, it is like a picture," she said in an awestruck voice; and indeed the old refectory was a pleasant place that evening with its blazing fire and soft lamplight shining on the gleaming silver and beautiful old-fashioned china of Lilian's tea-table. Nigger was stretched on a tiger-skin in front of the fire; some softly cushioned

chairs and the oak settle looked deliciously inviting, while the tall screen shut in the circle of brightness from the haunting shadows that appeared to lurk at the other end of the hall, the great rafters and dark panelling seeming to swallow up the light.

The upper end of the Friars' Hall was cheerful enough. More than once as she sat there Eunice glanced up at the winding staircase and the dark gallery overhead, as though she half expected to see a cowled head peeping down on them. Once Lilian caught her in the act.

"Yes, I know," she observed in an amused voice, "that is just what Araby does; if we put her at that side of the table she is always fancying somebody is looking down on us from the gallery; you see, it is impossible to light such a big place properly, and so the shadows must be legion. Not that it troubles us, does it, Douglas? there is room for us and the old friars too."

"It is a nice place," observed Miss Jem, stirring her tea with evident enjoyment, "but the white parlour is more to my mind, as I often tell Lilian;" but Eunice refused to endorse this. "It is just a beautiful picture," she said to herself, and then half unconsciously her glance rested on the tall, athletic figure of her young host leaning back in lazy enjoyment in the old settle, with Nigger's head between his knees. How perfectly he and Lilian suited their environment; but as this thought crossed her mind Douglas raised his head and encountered the girl's innocent glance; the next moment he gave Nigger a playful kick and sprang up.

"Did you say six o'clock, Miss Jem?" he asked quickly. "I am forgetting the second part of my duties as a host, to speed the parting guest, and have never told Compton to bring the carriage round."

"You tiresome fellow, then we shall be late for supper," returned Miss Jem good-humouredly. "Not that it matters, for I have eaten enough for two days—I always do when I come here. Well, we will put on our things, Miss Cleveland, my dear."

And then they followed Lilian upstairs and along the long dim gallery to the Gable Room, as it was called. "I have had such a happy day," were Eunice's parting words to the brother and sister as she and Miss Jem drove off. "Thank you so much for all the pleasure you have given me."

"Good-bye, we shall meet on Saturday," returned Lilian, waving her hand, for another bicycle lesson was arranged for that day, and Lilian and Douglas had promised to spend the evening at the Dene.

Eunice was rather sorry when Miss Jem proposed that Araby should be asked too. "Would it not be nicer to have them just by themselves?" she suggested timidly, but to her surprise Miss Jem negatived this.

"No, I think not," she replied with unusual decision. "Araby would be just mad if we asked them without her; she is a bit touchy and jealous where the Hiltons are concerned. They are such old friends, you see, and I never dare let on that Lilian is my favourite." And though Eunice did not quite comprehend this, she had the tact to say no more, though she privately felt convinced that her enjoyment would be lessened if Araby Pater was to be present. "We shall not have half so much fun," she said to herself. "Miss Pater is nice and friendly, but somehow one has to be on one's best behaviour. One would never feel that with the Hiltons."

CHAPTER XVI

ARABY

The desire of being pleased is universal, the desire of pleasing should be so too. Let us not only scatter benefits, but even strew flowers for our fellow-travellers in the rugged ways of this world.—LORD CHESTERFIELD.

As usual Miss Durnford's return was heralded by the noisy greetings of her four-legged friends. Tommy, who had struck up a violent friendship with the new inmate of the house, was exceedingly demonstrative in his attentions.

Eunice received them somewhat absently, and was hastening to her room when Miss Jem's voice recalled her.

"Isn't it a pity!" she said, in rather a disappointed tone. "Here Mr. Desmond and Billy have been to call, and Rachel says the child looked ready to cry when he heard we were not at home. Just fancy, he had dragged that cart every step of the way—you said so, didn't you, Rachel?"

"Oh yes, ma'am," replied the maid, "and the poor little fellow looked quite hot and tired. 'Tell the lady Billy brought it all the way his own self, and give her Billy's love'—these were his words, ma'am."

"Wasn't it a pretty message?" returned Jem, beaming. "What a dear he is! Well, I would not have missed him for ever so."

"Oh, I daresay we shall see him soon," replied Eunice. She was too truthful to express any disappointment. Billy was all very well, she was too fond of children not to be interested in him; but Mr. Desmond threatened to become a perfect incubus. "It is the thin end of

the wedge," she said to herself again, and then with a little shrug she put away the disturbing thought and gave herself up to blissful retrospection.

It was a great pleasure to Eunice to write a long account of her visit to Monkbarn the next morning. She knew how every detail would interest Lucia; but as soon as her letter was finished she put on her hat and jacket and started for a long walk.

"It is a shame to stay in this lovely morning," she told herself, by way of salving her conscience; but the truth was her day's outing had somewhat demoralised her, and she felt too restless to settle down to work or useful reading. When she was ready she went in search of Miss Durnford and found her in the apple-loft, turning over the fruit and filling a big basket.

"Why, you are one for exercise, Miss Cleveland," she exclaimed in a wondering voice. "I should have thought you would have been too stiff to move to-day. Well, if you are going out you might as well give Tommy and Baby a run, and perhaps you would step up to Chez-Nous—it will save me writing a note—and ask Araby to drop in to dinner on Saturday. Tell her we have no one but Douglas and Lilian coming, so she need not trouble to be smart."

"That is returning good for evil," returned Eunice, smiling; but Jem only shook her head rather gravely at this allusion, and went on picking out her apples. She had forgiven her tormentors, but it would be long before Jem would forget the mortification she endured on the birthday evening; and as for her dress, she felt as though she would never care to put it on again.

"No one likes to be thought a fool," she said to herself rather angrily, when Eunice had left her. "My vanity has had an object-lesson, as Douglas would say. Well, I am old enough to know better, and of course I was a big goose for my pains; a little old maid of nine-and-thirty ought not to be decking herself out like a miss of seventeen; but there, I do love a bit of finery,

and even Miss Cleveland said she had never seen me look so well," and Jem gave a little simpering laugh of satisfaction at the recollection. "Why, even Mr. Desmond did not know me, though he had seen me three or four hours before."

Eunice did not much relish her errand. A morning call at Chez-Nous was rather formidable; but as she came in sight of the house she saw Araby coming down the avenue, and she determined to wait for her at the gate and to give her message without going in.

The avenue was a long one, and Eunice had plenty of time to admire Araby's graceful carriage and movements; she walked with a swift birdlike motion, as though she merely skimmed the ground. "She is very distinguished-looking; one would soon forget that she is not a bit pretty," thought Eunice; and then Araby came up and greeted her with evident pleasure.

"You were coming to see us," she said quickly; "I will turn back with you. My sister-in-law is in the morning-room writing a letter for the Indian mail, but she never minds being interrupted; we have had one or two visitors already." But Eunice would not hear of this.

"I have only brought a message from Miss Durnford," she replied; "there is no need for me to trouble Mrs. Pater," and then she explained the purport of her visit.

Araby received the invitation very graciously. "Tell Miss Jem that I shall be very pleased to come, and I will bring her favourite songs," and Araby's pale face brightened perceptibly. "Miss Cleveland, you are going for a walk, are you not? May I join you? Ian was too busy to come with me this morning, and I am not particularly enamoured of my own company."

Eunice felt secretly embarrassed by this proposal; a *tête-à-tête* with Araby Pater was even more formidable than a morning call at Chez-Nous; but she contrived to hide her reluctance, and her cheerful assent left nothing to be desired.

"She will find me a very stupid companion," Eunice said to herself. "I have read so little and done so little in my life." But before the first milestone was passed, she had entirely forgotten herself in the pleasure she felt in Araby's conversation.

If Araby had laid herself out to please and fascinate her new acquaintance, she could not have succeeded better; but whatever might be her motive, there was no effort manifested in her varied and brilliant talk; the very fact that she chose such themes for conversation was in itself a subtle form of flattery, and Eunice, who had plenty of intelligence, found herself equal to the situation.

"I wish I knew as much as you," she observed regretfully, as they sat down to rest on a fallen log by the wayside. "How many books you must have read, and how clever you must be! I have had so little time for study; you see, I had to teach the children and to work for them.

Araby's brilliant hazel eyes rested on her companion rather curiously. They had not walked far, but she was tired, and panted slightly as she spoke.

"Oh, it is nothing. I often have a pain in my side," she said carelessly, as Eunice noticed this. "I am not very strong, and very little knocks me up.

"No, I am not really clever," she went on, "but I have the advantage of living with an intellectual man. I am very proud of my brother, Miss Cleveland. From a child he has interested me in all his pursuits; when I was younger he directed my reading, and in some things I am still his pupil; oh, we have wonderful talks sometimes! My sister-in-law is a dear little woman, and I am very fond of her, but she is not really intellectual; but all the same she loves to hear Ian talk. Now tell me about yourself, Miss Cleveland. I have an inexhaustible curiosity about other people's lives. You live with a brother too, do you not? I think Miss Jem told me that he was a doctor."

It is the unexpected that always happens. An hour ago Eunice would not have believed it possible that she would have been talking in this comfortable unrestrained way to Araby Pater.

True, she lacked Lilian's frank simplicity, and that pleasant sense of comradeship that endeared the latter to her friends; but all the same her smile and manner were very winning, and Eunice, who was never loth to talk of the dear home-folks, had soon told Araby all she wanted to know.

"Many would have thought my life monotonous," finished Eunice; "but I have always been so happy."

"And yet you left it." Eunice could make nothing of Araby's tone; it was gentle, but cool, and seemed to suggest a doubt.

"Oh, it was my duty to leave it," she returned, a little sorrowfully; "it was not right for me to be a burden on my brother. Put yourself in my place, Miss Pater; think of all those children to feed and clothe and educate, and think of me a strong healthy girl, consenting to eat the bread of idleness."

"No, you are right," returned Araby, but she spoke in a melancholy tone. "A little while ago you were envying my cleverness, but I have far greater reason to envy you your good health. You are so strong, you have such spirit and energy, and then you ask so little of life that it surprises me," and here Araby's eyes had a singular brooding look in them. "You and Lilian talk alike, you are both so healthy-minded; my nature is more exacting. I make demands on life and people that cannot always be met, and then comes disillusion and heart-burning."

"Oh, it is not well to expect too much of people," returned Eunice, a little puzzled by the change in her companion's manner; it was as though some jarring note had been struck, which checked the harmonious flow of their conversation; "blessed is he who expecteth nothing," she continued lightly.

"Perhaps so, but from a child I have never cared for copybook axioms in however fair a round hand." Araby spoke in a repressive voice, and her manner was abrupt. "I am rested now," she continued, rising as she spoke. "We had better go back, I think, for it is getting late;" but Eunice noticed with some concern that she walked a little wearily.

"I am afraid we have taken too long a walk," observed Eunice anxiously; but Araby negatived this.

"I should have gone farther if I had been alone," she remarked carelessly. "I have an insane habit of walking on and on when the mood seizes me, as though I were the Wandering Jew himself, and then, if there is no short-cut home, I arrive in a footsore condition. Do you ever suffer from restlessness, Miss Cleveland?"

"No, I think not; at least, not unless the weather has kept me too much indoors—when I have a cold, I mean, for as a matter of fact I go out in all weathers."

"Oh, I call that legitimate and justifiable restlessness," returned Araby in the same enigmatical tone; "there is nothing abnormal in that. My temperament is more mercurial; there are days when the house feels like a prison, when a gallop on Jessie is my only relief, when space, movement, and the free winds of heaven seem vitally necessary. Now, I daresay," with a laugh that sounded a little forced and wanting in mirth, "that you have never longed to be a tramp sleeping under the hedge."

"I should think not!" in a startled tone. "What a queer girl you are!" she added mentally.

"Oh, but I have," returned Araby recklessly. "On hot July nights, when sleep was impossible, when worrying thoughts seemed to sting like mosquitoes, and there was no way of keeping them out, why, I have felt half crazy with the wish to be out under the stars. Don't you understand, Miss Cleveland, how much one loses at night —the stillness, the fragrance of myriad sweet flowers, the lovely dew bath? I will tell you what I did once,"

she continued, resuming her old manner. "I daresay it was very wrong of me, because Ian was away, and he always expects me to look after Tina and keep her out of mischief; but the heat-wave was too much for me. So one sultry night I had the hammocks slung near the house, and when the servants had gone to bed I coaxed Tina to slip out into the garden—of course we had plenty of wraps, and Rover, my brother's dog, was with us, so there was not the least occasion for fear."

"Oh, do go on, Miss Pater," for Araby had made a long pause.

"Well, we were as comfortable as possible; the night was heavenly, and it was perfectly delicious to lie under the dark trees and watch the soft streaks of moonlight between the branches. I could hear the whirring of the night-jar in the distance; it was so still and balmy and sweet that I was just dropping into a doze when Tina woke me with a little shriek; she declared a bat had flown in her face, and after that there was no peace. Rover got restless and scented cats, and when he growled Tina got into a dreadful state; a tramp had been seen in the village that day, she told me, a great big hulking creature with a flattened nose like a prize-fighter, and perhaps he might be lurking in the grounds, and we might be murdered before help came. It was no use reasoning with her—the next growl from Rover made her quite hysterical; there was nothing for it but to go back to the house, and even then Tina would not be left alone. I was quite furious with disappointment, but I was obliged to give in; and as I refused to wake Lalla, I had to lie down on the bed beside her, while Rover passed the night in his master's dressing-room; but we neither of us slept a wink."

"What an adventure!" exclaimed Eunice; "but of course Captain Pater never heard of your escapade."

"My dear Miss Cleveland, that innocent remark shows me that you are quite ignorant of Tina's nature. She never keeps anything from her husband; it was a fore-

gone conclusion that Ian would know everything in the first hour of his return."

"Was he vexed?"

"Vexed! he was downright angry; he would not look at me or speak to me for the rest of the day. He told me that I had betrayed his trust, that I had tempted Tina to do a very wrong and dangerous thing, that we were utterly unprotected; that the tramp, as Tina called him, was really an escaped convict, and had passed the previous night in a wood-shed in the Vicarage garden, and had frightened one of the servants into giving him food the next morning—oh, I had to be properly penitent before Ian would forgive me; and to tell you the truth, Miss Cleveland, when I heard about the convict I felt I had done a rash thing. I wish you could have seen Douglas Hilton's face when I told him and Lilian the whole story; he was quite as angry as Ian had been. He had the impertinence to say that I ought to have been ashamed of myself, not only for endangering our lives, but for leaving my brother's house unprotected. As he had no right to scold me I would not speak to him for weeks, and it would have been a regular breach between the two families, only Lilian, like a good little soul, made peace between us.

"I am a good hater as well as a good lover," she went on, fixing her eyes with rather a strange expression on Eunice as she spoke; "I do nothing by halves. Well, here we are at Chez-Nous, thank goodness, for I am tired to death—it is a shame to confess it when I have been enjoying your pleasant company. Adieu until Saturday," and then Araby waved her hand in a nonchalant, graceful fashion, and walked slowly up the avenue, while Eunice, knowing that it must be late, quickened her pace into a run, and arrived breathless, to find Miss Durnford had already commenced her luncheon. As usual, she took Eunice's excuses with perfect good-humour; but when the latter commenced a hurried account of her morning's walk, Miss Jem listened a little absently.

"So you have been with Araby," she observed, when Eunice paused to help herself to some vegetables; "that's right; she is a clever girl, and she will be a nice companion for you when you cannot get Lilian, though I know you favour Lilian. Well, I have had a visitor too," and here Miss Jem gave a little conscious laugh. "Who do you suppose came, ten minutes after you left the house?"

"I think I can guess," returned Eunice, "but I hardly thought Mr. Desmond would have come so soon again. Don't you think it was rather pushing of him? I suppose Billy came too."

"No, he was tired, from dragging that great cart all the way here and over-exciting himself, so his father wisely left him at home. I don't know why you should say Mr. Desmond is pushing, Miss Cleveland, my dear, because he wants to be civil and neighbourly; he said he was bound to thank me for my kindness to his motherless boy, that Billy had been nearly out of his wits with delight when he opened the parcel. 'He would not go to sleep last night until I put the cart where he could see it first thing in the morning'—fancy, he told me that! Poor little darling, I am glad—that I am—that I got it for him."

"Did Mr. Desmond stay long?" asked Eunice, a little anxiously; but Miss Jem seemed desirous of evading this question.

"I don't know what you call long," she returned hurriedly. "We had a nice talk, and he made himself very agreeable; he had lost that queer cut-and-dried, satirical manner that you did not like, and seemed quite at his ease and like other people. He wanted to know all about you, how we came to be friends and that sort of thing—not that he asked downright questions," as Eunice drew herself up with a surprised air, "he is far too gentlemanly for that; but he said in such a kind way that it must be rather lonely for me living in a big house all by myself, and that it must be pleasant for me to have

a young companion—you have no need to be affronted, my dear," as Eunice coloured up with annoyance; "he did not say a word that you would not have cared to hear, only that I seemed to have chosen wisely, and that you seemed a very bright, cheerful young lady."

"I don't see that he had any need to mention me at all," returned Eunice, who was not to be mollified by this remark. "Why should he talk about us, Miss Durnford? I really do think it was presuming of him."

"Lor', my dear, there is no pleasing you where Mr. Desmond is concerned," returned Jem impatiently; "you are for ever picking holes in his manners. In my opinion he is quite an acquisition to the place; he says he has known a deal of trouble, poor fellow, and that his life has been a sad one—'If it had not been for my boy, life would not be worth living,' he said, and then he got up and shook hands, and said he must not stop any longer, or he should be forgetting himself."

"Whatever did he mean by that?" asked Eunice.

"Why, my dear, how scared you look! Of course, I understood what the poor fellow meant—that he had not met with too much sympathy and kindness in his life, and that he was thankful for even a crumb of comfort,—that's what he meant," finished Jem, with a soft, womanly look in her blue eyes, which touched Eunice so much that she did not say another word.

CHAPTER XVII

A BASKET OF EGGS

What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?—SHAKESPEARE.

And sheathed their swords for lack of argument.
—*King Henry V.*

THAT evening, when the two ladies had finished their game of bezique, Miss Jem said suddenly, "Did Araby ask anything about our day at Monkbarn?" then Eunice shook her head. "Didn't you tell her about the bicycle lesson?" rather curiously.

"No, why should I?" in a surprised tone; "we were talking chiefly about books and sleeping out of doors, and then she told me that funny tramp story."

"Oh, I have no patience with her when she gets on that subject," returned Miss Jem quite crossly. "I do believe the girl is a bit crazy sometimes, she has such queer, hare-brained notions. I expect it is all that Greek and astronomy that the Captain teaches her, that is too much for her head; why, the house might have been robbed and all the maids murdered while they were star-gazing in that plantation. I am glad the Captain did put his foot down, for Araby has behaved herself like a Christian ever since, for all her fine talk."

"She is dreadfully clever," sighed Eunice. "I wish I could talk as well as she can, but she never told me that she knew Greek."

"Oh, Araby isn't one to boast; I will say that for her; but what good all that rubbish will do her passes my comprehension. She will only look down upon her husband because he is not as clever as herself."

"Do you think she is likely to be married?" Eunice never knew what impelled her to ask this question.

"I suppose she will, some day," returned her companion rather vaguely. "As far as money is concerned most people would consider her a catch, but if I were a young fellow I wouldn't have Araby for a wife if there were not another girl to be had. She is not restful enough for my taste, and she is too exacting. Unless her husband was as strong as the Captain, he would never master her. I do believe the Captain is the only person that Araby really minds."

"She seems very devoted to him, but I must confess that I find her rather incomprehensible."

"Do you, now?" returned Miss Jem. "Well, I don't wonder, for she is a bit puzzling at times; but there, I was going to say something quite different, only you have nearly put it out of my head. Don't you say anything about the bicycle lesson unless Lilian mentions it. Araby is a trifle touchy about the Hiltons. As I told you, she is a deal too fond of monopolising people; but Lilian knows how to manage her."

"Are they such close friends, Miss Durnford?"

"Lor', my dear, how should I know? I think Araby is fond of Lilian. Now, why should you be so stiff and stand-offish with me, child? It is Miss Durnford here, and Miss Durnford there, as though I were fifty at least. Why don't you call me Miss Jem, as all my friends do?"

"But in my position it would be such a liberty," returned Eunice, colouring up as she spoke.

"Bless me, how you talk!" returned Miss Jem impatiently. "I thought we were going to be such good friends. Miss Jem sounds much more homely and comfortable." And Jem's tone was a little wistful.

"If you really would not mind," began Eunice, rather shyly; but Jem interrupted her.

"There's a good girl," she exclaimed, "and I will call you Eunice. I have nearly done so one or twice already, though it is such an outlandish sort of name. There,

now, we shall get on like a house on fire, for though you have not been a fortnight here I feel as though we have known each other for years. Isn't that funny, now? I daresay before long I shall be as fond of you as I am of Lilian," And here Jem gave her a hearty kiss.

"How can I help liking her?" thought Eunice when she was alone in her luxurious room; "she is such a warm-hearted, good little creature. All her faults seem on the surface. She is vain, and very self-willed. Oh, I am sure she is that. And she is dreadfully impulsive. But I know I shall end by loving her with all my heart." And then Eunice smiled as she remembered her first feelings of dismay when she caught sight of the little Dutch-built figure, with the untidy sandy fringe, that bustled down the hotel corridor to meet her. "It is never well to judge by appearances," she said to herself, and then she remembered Araby's dislike to copybook wisdom. This turned her thoughts into another channel, and she began asking herself why Araby Pater both repelled and attracted her. "I like her—she fascinates me," she went on, "but I don't believe I could ever love her. She is not really cold, and yet her manner chills one; and then her moods are so variable;" and then just as she was falling into a doze a sudden recollection made her broad awake again. "I wonder what Miss Jem meant by telling me not to mention the bicycle lesson? it seems so odd. What business has Araby Pater to interfere with my private concerns? If I asked Lilian I wonder if she could tell me?" But though Eunice revolved this question from every possible point of view, she could find no feasible answer.

The next morning, as they sat chatting over their breakfast, Eunice announced her intention of taking another long country walk—"Unless there is anything that you would like me to do in the town," she continued, suddenly remembering her manners.

"No, thank you, my dear," replied Jem. "Andrew is going in that direction, so he will do my commissions.

I should not mind a bit of a stretch myself, only I have that hamper to pack, and by the time I have finished it will be luncheon-time. We will have a drive this afternoon, and take the General; he is rather peaky, poor old dear. Stay, though," as Eunice was about to leave the room; "Mrs. Compton told me we are getting short of eggs again. When you have had your walk you might come back by Birdhurst Lane and get some more from Betty. She will lend you a basket."

"Very well," returned Eunice, "and I will take Tommy and Baby. How tiresome that eggs are always running short!" she said to herself as she went upstairs; "if I had dared I would have suggested that one of the maids should go. I do hope that I shall not encounter my *bête noir*."

Eunice's hope was not to be verified, for as she unlatched the gate at Honey Hanger she saw Billy in the little front garden playing with his grand new cart. Mr. Desmond was standing in the porch watching him and smoking a German meerschaum pipe. He laid it aside hastily when he saw Eunice. Billy dropped the reins and ran up to her.

"Where is the lady that gave Billy the cart?" he asked. "Billy wants to see her."

"Children never beat about the bush, do they, Miss Cleveland?" observed Mr. Desmond, lifting his cap with an easy grace, but not offering his hand. "May I ask if this visit is to us or to Betty?"

"To Betty. I have come to ask for some more eggs." Eunice spoke rather abruptly. There was something in Mr. Desmond's cool, keen look that made her feel awkward and constrained. "I know you do not like me, but. I shall make you change your mind before I have finished with you." This is what his eyes seemed to say.

"Billy will go, too, and fetch the basket," broke in the child eagerly.

"Now look here, Bill, old chap," returned his father, taking him by the shoulders; "don't you think it is about

time to drop that baby trick? Billy this, and Billy that; what is the use of personal pronouns if you shunt them in that fashion?"

"Oh, it is so pretty to hear him!" pleaded Eunice, for the child looked somewhat frightened.

"Billy is not naughty, dad," he said anxiously. "Billy's a good boy now." Then Mr. Desmond laughed, but he still held him firmly.

"Look here, my lad; we will just transpose that sentence. Say it after me, Bill—'I am not naughty, dad. I am a good boy now.'" Then as Billy obediently repeated the words he patted him on the head.

"Now remember, no more silly Billies, but I, I, I;" and then, as he removed his hands, the child darted to Eunice.

"Now may——" Then, as his father held up a warning finger, the poor little fellow flushed up and hung his head.

"Oh, why are you so strict with him?" asked Eunice rather indignantly; "he is such a baby. I have a little nephew who does just the same, but we all love to hear him."

"Does *all* include the masculine element?" asked Mr. Desmond dryly.

"Yes; it includes my brother. He has never corrected Lot yet. 'It is just a baby trick, and he will soon lose it;' that is what he says."

"I am afraid I differ from Dr. Cleveland," returned Mr. Desmond. Eunice started slightly at this mention of her brother, and then she remembered that Miss Jem had probably informed him that he was a doctor. "In my opinion, education should begin in the nursery, and all foolish tricks of speech or manner be promptly eradicated."

There was a hardness in this speech that revolted the girl; a sudden impulse of pity made her stroke the fair little head that nestled so confidingly against her. "I do not think his mother would have said that," she mur-

mured half to herself; but she was startled by the effect of these few words. Mr. Desmond's expression changed, the satirical smile died on his lips, his face looked stern and forbidding.

"Perhaps not; there are mothers and mothers; but I am detaining you from your bargain with our excellent Betty." And then he raised his cap rather stiffly and walked away.

"Now, what can I have said to make him fly off at such a tangent?" Eunice asked herself in some perplexity as she and Billy went on, hand-in-hand, up the little path. "I think I never met any one so disagreeable before. I do dislike that sneering manner of his, and I don't believe he is kind to Billy." They had reached the porch by this time, and as Mr. Desmond had disappeared from sight, Eunice stooped down and kissed the pale little face. "Darling," she said, "I want you to try and remember what father said, and not call yourself Billy any more."

"Isn't I Billy, then?" asked the child in a puzzled tone. "Dad does always say Billy."

"Yes, dear, because it is your name; but you heard what dad said—you must always say I. Now, will you go and find Betty for me?" And the boy nodded and vanished.

Betty was not so deaf on this occasion, and Eunice had no difficulty in making her understand her errand. In a few minutes the eggs were packed in a basket, but as the girl marched off with her booty she was surprised to see Mr. Desmond waiting for her at the gate. He greeted her with a smile, and seemed to have recovered his equanimity.

"I hope you will allow me to carry the basket for you," he said, so politely that Eunice was quite taken aback.

"Thank you very much, but it is not heavy," she stammered.

"That means, I suppose, that you decline my assistance? Do you always put all your eggs into one basket, Miss Cleveland? It is a great mistake, I assure you,

Bill, old chap, you would like to go up the lane with the lady? Ah! I thought so," as Billy nodded vehemently. "He has taken a great fancy to you and your friend, Miss Cleveland. 'The pretty lady, and the lady what was good to Billy.' That is how he classifies you. Children are keen observers in their own little way." And Mr. Desmond's brilliant, inscrutable smile was quite startling. It lit up his handsome face without softening it, just as sunshine gilds some rocky surface. He had opened the gate as he spoke, but as Eunice bowed and passed him he stood there with his elbows resting on it until she and Billy were out of sight; then he sauntered back to the porch and took up his pipe again.

"That girl is not vain," he said to himself, "and so the bait failed to take. Billy is wrong, she is not pretty, but somehow she attracts me, though it is evident that the young lady herself does not return the compliment. If I had not other fish to fry," he went on, "it would amuse me right well to overcome her aversion. She is more to my taste than that extremely solid and unrefined little person whom Bill seems to adore. Just you look out, Keefe Desmond, my fine fellow. No more mistakes, or you will go overboard once too often; beggars must not be choosers," and here he knocked out the ashes from his pipe rather savagely. "Great Scot! if one could only clear off the ashes of one's life in this fashion and ram in good fresh stuff," and here he opened his tobacco-pouch; "but Fate, that inexorable, hoary-headed old hag, has decreed otherwise—if I were not so deadly sick of it all. But if it were not for the boy, poor little chap, I should not care a hang what became of me."

When Eunice narrated this little scene at the luncheon-table, Jem's face wore a somewhat pained expression.

"I am glad you spoke up for Billy," she observed. "I am afraid his father is a bit strict with him. I shall have it out with him some day if he does not mend his ways. Do you know, Eunice," she continued a few minutes later, "I got the notion in my head yesterday, when

he was talking in that melancholy fashion, that that wife of his did not make him over comfortable. Perhaps she wasn't good to him or Billy either, and this has soured him a bit."

"I don't believe he is happy," was Eunice's reply to this, but she wished afterwards that she had not said it. Miss Jem's nature was so soft and compassionate that her interest in the fascinating stranger at Honey Hanger would only increase if she considered him the victim of misfortune.

The Hiltons kept their appointment very punctually on Saturday afternoon, and Eunice had a long bicycle lesson. Lilian left them after a time and went in to talk to Miss Jem.

"You are a most promising pupil," observed Douglas encouragingly as he and Eunice walked up the road together; he was pushing her machine before him. It was too dark for her to ride any longer; the evening was cold and somewhat misty, but Eunice was in a glow from the unaccustomed exercise.

"I know I shall love it," she returned enthusiastically. "It will add a new pleasure to life. Oh, how glad I am," she added laughingly, "that I did not live in the dark ages—before bicycles were invented! I mean to save up my money and get one of my own some day. It will be a splendid investment, and then I can teach Daisy to ride. Daisy is my eldest niece; she is such a dear child, only the boys have made her a tomboy."

"She will be none the worse for that," replied Mr. Hilton. "Lilian was a perfect hoyden in her youth. She climbed trees and played hockey and cricket until one forgot she was a girl, and nothing made her so angry as to remind her that she belonged to the weaker sex. If I had not been sent to school she would have been utterly demoralised by my example. But our dear mother took her in hand and broke her of her tomboy habits, but she loves a game of cricket still. Miss Cleveland," with a sudden change of tone, "you must let me

get your machine for you. I shall make a much better bargain than you would, and it would not give me the least trouble." He spoke almost coaxingly, and Eunice coloured a little in the darkness.

"You are very kind," she returned gratefully, "but I am afraid it will be a long time before I shall be able to afford one."

"Well, Lilian has no use for her old one," was the cool reply; "it would only be rusting in a corner of the harness-room, so the kindness is on your side, Miss Cleveland."

"Yes, I see," with a merry laugh. "What a nice way you have of conferring a favour on a person!" and then she ran indoors, while Douglas walked off with the bicycle. As she entered the hall Miss Jem came out of the drawing-room.

"Wherever has Douglas gone?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh, he is only putting the bicycle with the others in the outhouse," returned Eunice brightly. "Oh, I have had such a lovely time, Miss Jem! Mr. Hilton is a splendid teacher. He gives one confidence. Why, he says I shall soon be able to ride with Lilian. I am to practise for half-an-hour every day if you will let Andrew or Compton come with me."

"Why, to be sure I will," returned Miss Jem in her hearty way. "You are welcome to Andrew, though he will be a bit clumsy, I fear. But, Eunice," her flurried manner returning, "I have been fidgeting to get you back the last half-hour. It was almost too dark to ride. Even Lilian said so. And there's Araby in the drawing-room looking none too pleased because you were not here to receive her."

"Miss Pater here!" in an incredulous tone. "I thought she was only coming to dinner. I know I gave her your message correctly."

"Lor', my dear, do you suppose I don't know that? But if Araby took it into her head to come to tea she would not ask any one's leave. Those Paters are cool

fish. There's Lilian been telling her about you wanting to learn how to ride, and making things as nice as possible, and if you had only not stopped out so late." And here Miss Jem shook her head and looked unutterable things as she led the way back to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XVIII

EUNICE IS PUZZLED

I am not merry; but I do beguile
The thing I am, by seeming otherwise.

Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ.

—*Othello.*

As soon as Eunice entered the room she became aware of a frigidity in the atmosphere. Araby rose from her seat and shook hands with her very gravely. "I hope you were not tired after your walk," she said rather stiffly. And then without waiting for her answer she resumed her conversation with Lilian.

Eunice felt decidedly snubbed, and, as it was evident that Araby did not wish for her society, she joined Miss Jem, who had already taken her place at the tea-table; but she was amused to find that Mr. Hilton met with the same chilling reception. Araby did not even look at him as she gave him her hand. Eunice saw a glance of amusement pass between the brother and sister; then he sat down beside Araby and began talking to her in his usual easy fashion.

It was rather a difficult matter to snub Douglas Hilton. On such occasions he could present a perfectly blank surface of good-natured indifference. One might as well have shot at a granite rock and expected that the arrows would stick to it as to try and penetrate his denseness.

Araby, with all her princess airs and humours, was no match for him. In his quiet, masterful way he soon brought her to reason; her monosyllabic replies lengthened into sentences, and became shorn of their repelling

haughtiness; and a reproof from Miss Jem proved also salutary.

"Bless me, Araby," she said impatiently, "whatever makes you so nippy with everybody this evening? Eunice and I are quite chilled, as though the east wind had got into the room." Then Araby flushed angrily at this plain speaking, and Douglas laughed in his masculine fashion.

"It is a bit draughty," he said, with a mischievous glance at the girl. "I was thinking of turning up my collar just now;" and then he leaned towards her and said something in a low tone; and though Araby did not turn her head or make any answer, Eunice was surprised to see her the next moment get up from her seat and come towards the tea-table. After this her manner became more gracious, though she still kept Eunice at a distance, but all dinner-time she chatted with Douglas in the most animated fashion. Even when he alluded to the bicycle lesson and made an appointment for the following week, Araby took no apparent notice; but Eunice, whose suspicions were awakened, caught a side-long flash of the hazel eyes, and guessed instinctively that the arrangement did not please her.

"You must promise to practise every day," he went on.

"Oh yes," returned Eunice brightly. "Miss Durnford is kind enough to say that Andrew may come with me, so I mean to astonish you with my proficiency."

"I am afraid you are in a hurry to get rid of your master," he returned audaciously. "Miss Pater was not such an independent pupil. How many lessons did I give you?" he asked with apparent gravity.

"How can I remember?" she returned pettishly, but her eyelids drooped and there was a little smile on her lips as she moved away. "Miss Jem," she continued pleasantly, "should you like to have some music now? Lilian and I have brought our duets, if you care to hear them;" and as every one seemed charmed at this idea, Araby placed herself at the piano, and, as though in

obedience to some sign from her, Douglas stood beside her and turned over the leaves. Eunice gave herself up to enjoyment; she was far too humble-minded and unselfish to resent Araby's monopoly of the instrument. It was Lilian who at last reminded her that Eunice had not taken any part in the concert.

"I was not aware you played, Miss Cleveland," returned Araby in rather an ungracious manner. But she rose at once.

"Oh please—please do not get up," replied Eunice in an embarrassed voice. "I play so very little, that after you it would be such a poor performance; indeed I would rather not," as Douglas offered his arm in rather a peremptory fashion, but he would take no excuse.

"I think we shall be the best judge of your merits," he observed calmly. "If self-praise is no recommendation, self-depreciation is equally worthless."

"That's right, Douglas!" exclaimed Miss Jem approvingly. "Eunice is a deal too humble; she plays very nicely—yes, you do, dear, and I have told you so; and she has a pretty voice too, though of course Araby would take the shine out of her. Play those Scotch airs that I liked so much," and thus encouraged Eunice got over her nervousness, and acquitted herself very creditably. Soon after this the carriage came for Araby, and Eunice, at a hint from Miss Jem, went up with her to her room. Araby accepted her attendance rather unwillingly.

"Why should I disturb you, Miss Cleveland?" she said coldly. "Susan is always upstairs hovering about." But Eunice was not to be repelled. As she stood by the toilet-table watching Araby pin on her hat, she noticed the lovely curve of the cheek and throat, and the swan-like grace with which Araby moved her long neck. Then a quick girlish impulse came to Eunice.

"Miss Pater," she said sweetly, "I am afraid you are not quite pleased with me this evening, your manner is so different from what it was on Thursday. I cannot think what I can have done."

There is nothing so disarming as gentleness and frankness. Araby was evidently taken aback by this naive girlish speech; the next moment she turned round with a little laugh.

"How absurd, Miss Cleveland! Of course you have done nothing. I was in a tiresome mood to-night. Things seemed somehow cross and contrary, and I felt thorny and disagreeable. I know I have not behaved nicely to you," she continued frankly. "I ought to have asked you to play, and you were a dear to put up with my fractiousness," and here, to Eunice's surprise, Araby kissed her cheek. "We will have another walk together, and then I will behave prettily;" but though Araby smiled, the brilliant eyes had a sombre look in them. Douglas, who was waiting in the hall to put her into the carriage, looked at both the girls rather keenly as they came towards him.

Eunice felt a little surprised when she saw Araby go up to him and put her hand on his arm.

"I have been making my peace with Miss Cleveland," she said, looking up at him, for, tall as she was, Douglas Hilton towered over her. "I have been naughty to her this evening, but she has an angelic temper." But Eunice could not hear his answer, only when he came back to her his face was a little flushed; but he said nothing, and they went back together to the drawing-room.

"Araby hasn't been in the best of tempers this evening," observed Miss Jem in her outspoken way—she was sometimes wanting in tact—"something had put my young lady out. I expect Lilian and I can make a guess if we tried," nodding at Lilian shrewdly. "I am glad you brought her to her senses, Douglas, for she snubbed poor Eunice dreadfully—that she did, and she was as innocent of offense as a child unborn. Oh, those Paters have their tempers, and no mistake!"

"And so have we all, my dear Miss Jem;" but though Douglas spoke in a bland voice, he was evidently not

pleased by these observations. "Now, Lilian, it is late and the moon's up, so we will make tracks, little girl."

"I don't believe you have enjoyed yourself a bit this evening," remarked Miss Jem in a regretful voice as Eunice wished her good-night. "I am sorry now that I asked Araby, for we should have got on a deal better without her."

"Oh, it does not matter, and she was very nice to me upstairs. I think something must have vexed her." But though Eunice made light of her snubbing, she went to bed in a perplexed and uneasy frame of mind.

Why should Miss Pater object to these bicycle lessons? What right had she to monopolise the Hiltons so entirely? That they were old friends was sufficiently patent; she knew that Araby was often at Monkbarn, and that the brother and sister frequently dined at Chez-Nous; but such unmistakable jealousy was incomprehensible.

"It is not as though Mr. Hilton paid me any attention," Eunice said to herself, and the mere thought made her hot; "he is just kind and good-natured because I am a stranger and in a dependent position, and he knows it pleases Miss Jem." And then Eunice, who had a certain pride of her own, registered a private resolution to practise her riding so sedulously that her master would be soon dismissed; and she kept her word.

Under Andrew's rough-and-ready guidance she made such rapid progress that Douglas was quite surprised. After two or three more lessons she was able to join him and Lilian in a short expedition, and was commended in no grudging manner for her fearlessness.

Jem, who encountered them on the road, nearly backed into a ditch with astonishment and admiration as the girl rode up to her.

"Gracious me! how have you learnt to do it in this short time?" asked Jem incredulously. "Why, she has taken to it as a duckling takes to the water."

"I am very proud of my pupil," observed Douglas; "she does me credit—does she not, Lil?" Then Eunice,

who was looking very pretty with her fresh girlish bloom and bright eyes, quite blushed with pleasure.

"A good master makes a good pupil," she observed; and then there was the sound of horses' hoofs ringing on the road, and the next moment Araby cantered past them on her pretty chestnut mare Jessie, followed by Captain Pater. She gave them a cool greeting, and rather a queenly bend of her head, and did not stop to address them; but Captain Pater pulled up for a moment.

"Araby seems in a hurry," he observed. "I suppose we shall see you to-morrow, Douglas?" and, as the young man nodded, "You might as well bring your sister too, for the Archdeacon and Miss Prescott are coming. I know my wife or Araby was going to write about it.

"Oh, I will come," returned Lilian in her frank way; "I am so fond of the Archdeacon—oh, there is Araby looking round for you," and then the Captain trotted away.

"I think Araby might have asked you herself," observed Douglas in a low voice to his sister. "I have half a mind to leave you at home and go alone."

"Oh no, you won't," returned Lilian merrily; "I have been left alone twice this week already. I mean to have some fun too, and I love talking to the Archdeacon." And though Douglas shook his head meaningly at her, Lilian was evidently bent on getting her own way; but as they rode off together, Eunice could see that they were still arguing the matter.

"Douglas is a bit on his dignity," was Miss Jem's comment as she walked up the drive beside Eunice. "Nothing huffs him so much as seeing Araby slight Lilian—not that she is often to blame on that score, but it would not have hurt her to stop and give the message, especially as she knows that a note won't reach her until the morning; but there, it is none of my business," finished Miss Jem with a little shrug.

Two or three days after this, one raw November afternoon, Araby came round to the Dene to wish them good-

bye; she was going to Brighton, she told them, for some weeks to stay with an old friend.

"Lor', my dear, isn't this rather sudden?" asked Miss Jem, who seemed taken aback at this piece of information. "Why, I saw Mrs. Pater in the town yesterday, and she never said a word about it."

"I daresay not," returned Araby quietly; "I had not made up my mind to go then. I am rather sudden in my movements, as my friends know," she added with a dry little laugh.

Eunice thought she was looking ill and depressed; and though she was perfectly civil, and even friendly, there was no warmth in her manner. It struck her that the girl was trying to be conciliatory and pleasant, but that it cost her an effort, and that she was by no means at her ease.

When Eunice asked her when she intended to return, her answer was decidedly enigmatical.

"It is impossible for me to say, it depends on circumstances," and Eunice thought her manner very constrained. She kissed her at parting, however. "I hope you will look in on Tina sometimes, Miss Cleveland," she said in a more natural tone, as Eunice went to the door with her; "she has taken a fancy to you, and I am afraid she will miss me." Then Eunice promised that she would do her best.

Eunice felt a curious sensation of relief as she closed the door; it was as though she were suddenly free from some irksome surveillance. Araby's society had hitherto given her little pleasure, and yet more than once that day she found herself thinking of her with pity. "She is not happy," she thought, "and I am sure she is not well. I wonder what is troubling her?" And these impressions were confirmed when, on her next visit to Chez-Nous, Mrs. Pater told her that Araby was feeling stronger, though she still slept badly.

The next few weeks were delightful to Eunice; she and Lilian had become close friends, and every two or

three days Lilian came over to the Dene, and once a week at least Miss Jem and her young companion drove out to Medfield and had tea at Monkbarn. More than once, when her brother was away on business, Lilian wrote an urgent little note begging Eunice to have compassion on her loneliness. On these occasions Lilian always met her half-way, and the two girls bicycled back together. As the days were growing short, Lilian on one occasion insisted on keeping her for the night, and the next time Douglas had left orders that she was to be driven home.

The friendship between her and Lilian obliged her to see a great deal of the young master of Monkbarn. He was always at home when Miss Jem paid her weekly visits, and now and then he and Lilian dined at the Dene. They met too at Chez-Nous, and at one or two houses in Disborough. From the first Eunice had taken great pleasure in his society, and her liking and respect increased the more she knew him; but he had grown rather quieter, and though he was still as friendly and pleasant as ever, his behaviour was a little guarded, as though he had tutored himself to adopt a certain *rôle*—in short, as though he were not a free agent. Eunice used to puzzle herself not a little over a certain stiffness of comportment which was by no means natural to him; more than once she was sure that he avoided her. She was quite hurt one afternoon at the Archdeacon's, for he never even came near her until just before they left; and then he approached her with his old genial smile. But Eunice's feelings were wounded by his neglect, and she did not respond with any cordiality.

"I thought you were not aware of my existence," she said in rather a huffy tone. Poor little girl, she meant to be dignified, but she only managed to look very young and rather pathetic, and a shade crossed Douglas's face as he sat down beside her.

"Don't be cross with me," he said in his old coaxing voice; "we are far too good friends to misunderstand

each other. No, I did not forget your existence, but I had to play the part of deputy-host while the Archdeacon was out of the room. Now look pleasant, do, there's a good girl," and then Eunice, who felt very much ashamed of herself, blushed and laughed; and then, for the next quarter of an hour, Douglas made himself very charming. Eunice fancied that Miss Jem looked a little curiously at them both. Douglas had come out bareheaded to put the ladies into their carriage; it was very cold and the air threatened snow, and Miss Jem scolded him for his imprudence.

"There, do go back to the house," she said quite crossly, for he showed no intention of leaving them. He was leaning on the open window asking Eunice what she thought of a certain limp young clergyman who had sung a sentimental song—"He was rather like the Rev. Charles Honeyman in *The Newcomes*," he observed, and Eunice had agreed to this.

"I wish you would not answer him, Eunice," she continued fussily, "for he will take cold to a certainty. By the bye, Douglas, do you or Lilian know when Araby is coming home? she has been away a month now, and it will soon be Christmas. Do you suppose she will be back by the New Year?"

"I do not know—I suppose so," was the vague answer; and then he drew up the window and wished them good-bye rather hurriedly, but there was no longer a smile on his face.

"I wonder what made Douglas turn off so when I asked him about Araby?" observed Miss Jem, as they drove off from the Close. "There was nothing odd in my asking the question, for I know she and Lilian always write to each other when they are away;" but Eunice had no answer ready. She too had noticed Douglas Hilton's sudden gravity, though she was not willing to comment on it. Life was becoming complex to Eunice in more ways than one; nor was the varying behaviour of the master of Monkbarn the only source of secret uneasiness.

Mr. Desmond had become a frequent visitor at the Dene, and Jem was growing every day more intimate with him. "She is quite infatuated with the man," Eunice exclaimed one day in a despairing tone to Lilian. "He is beginning to get an influence over her, and I dare not say a word; she would not listen to me." And Lilian repeated this speech to Douglas, but he only frowned and made no answer.

CHAPTER XIX

"THE ANGELS MUST BE SORE AFFRONTED"

A loving heart is the great requirement.—*Teachings of Buddha.*

The heart of man is so constituted that its fulness comes of spending. When we serve—we rule. When we give—we have. When we surrender ourselves—we are victors. We are most ourselves when we lose sight of ourselves.—J. H. NEWMAN.

EUNICE was a sensible, right-minded girl. She had been brought up in a healthy home atmosphere, and there had been nothing narrow or repressive in her environment. Dr. Cleveland's shrewd common-sense had dominated the household; his opinions and prejudices had been held in reverence by his wife and sister. "My brother says so-and-so," was frequently on Eunice's lips, and Douglas Hilton had once observed in his sister's hearing that he wished she would follow Miss Cleveland's excellent example, and regard his opinion as equally infallible; but Lilian treated this remark with quiet scorn.

It was impossible for Eunice not to feel uneasy at the rapid growth of the intimacy between the mistress of the Dene and Betty Prior's lodgers; but as Miss Jem chose to take her own way, and seemed to object to any advice or interference with regard to her new friends, Eunice had no option but to hold her tongue, and her sole relief was to unburden herself to Lilian.

A closer acquaintance with Mr. Desmond did not prepossess her any more in his favour. The half-veiled satire of his manner when he addressed her still roused her secret antagonism.

"I cannot make him out," she said angrily once. "He is as nice as possible to Miss Jem—quite gentle and affable, as though he were on his best behaviour—but to

me he is different. Even Miss Jem notices it; but I know she thinks it is more my fault than his. 'He sees you don't like him, my dear,' she said the other day, 'and that sets his back up. He never talks to me in that dry, nippy fashion.' And she is right."

"And he comes very often to the Dene?" asked Lilian, who was somewhat disquieted at Eunice's account.

"Oh yes. And he has always some plausible excuse —a book to return, or a sketch to show, or to fetch Billy when he has been spending the day with us. Billy is at the bottom of the mischief, Lilian. Miss Jem quite dotes on the child, and never seems happy without him. So it stands to reason that Billy's father should look after him."

"Yes, I see;" and Lilian looked thoughtful.

"It worries me dreadfully," went on Eunice with quite a careworn expression. "Miss Jem is such a dear, and I do hate to see her imposed upon. I never can bring myself to believe in Mr. Desmond. I allow he is attractive—dangerously so—but I am not sure that he is good. The other morning, when he brought Billy, it began to snow, and Miss Jem kept them both to luncheon. I had plenty of opportunity of watching him that day, for Miss Jem was busy and left me to entertain him for the best part of an hour; and he was so carping and disagreeable all the time, and said such unpleasant things—sneering at one's pet creeds, and treading on one's corns in the most unfeeling way—that I was quite furious with him. But the moment Miss Jem entered the room his manner changed and became as sweet as honey. I don't call that behaving in a straightforward manner." And it was evident Lilian agreed with her.

Eunice had infected her friends at Monkbarn with her own uneasiness, but she had not told Lilian everything. She had suspected more than once that Mr. Desmond timed his visits when he knew she was out. On two or three occasions, when she returned from her morning run with the dogs, she noticed Miss Jem looked a little flut-

tered and conscious, though she said nothing. Jem was a bad dissembler, and was always ready to give herself away, and her manner would have aroused suspicions in any one more dense than Eunice. It was Rachel who one day innocently let the cat out of the bag when she brought a parcel to Eunice.

"Mrs. Compton paid for it, miss, she observed, "as Mr. Desmond was in the morning-room, and I did not like to trouble the mistress."

Eunice fidgeted a good deal over Miss Jem's unusual reticence. "If I had not shown my dislike so plainly," she said to herself, "she would not have kept things from me like this. I must be careful to hide my feelings, or I shall do more harm than good; but I do think, at her age, she ought to know better than to trust a complete stranger. It is utterly reckless and absurd." For Eunice's temper suffered a little from over-anxiety.

To make things worse, early in December Billy caught a bad feverish cold and was really ill. Mr. Desmond, who knew little about children's ailments, was at first rather inclined to pooh-pooh the notion that anything was seriously wrong with the child; but Jem implored him so urgently to allow her to send in her own doctor that he could not refuse, though the permission was given somewhat ungraciously.

"Billy has had these colds before," he said rather shortly, "and I never thought it necessary to have medical advice for him." But Mr. Desmond's manner changed after an interview with Dr. Hilliard.

"Only a cold!" the doctor had remarked rather testily. "That's what people always say; and it shows their ignorance. Colds fill graves as quickly as any other disease. The child is weakly"—as Mr. Desmond stared at him somewhat aghast at this—"and he has got a nasty feverish cold. He must be well nursed, or we shall have him slipping through our fingers." For Dr. Hilliard, who had already taken the measure of the man, was not disposed to mince his words.

That day Jem returned to the Dene in great distress, and appealed to her young companion for sympathy.

"Whatever are we to do, Eunice?" she said, with tears in her eyes. "There, the doctor says that Billy is as ill as possible, and that everything depends on the nursing; the fire is to be kept in all night, and there's Betty as deaf as a post, and Mr. Desmond knows about as much of nursing as I do of Greek and Latin."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Eunice in a grieved tone, for she had grown very fond of Billy. He was such a gentle little fellow that no woman could have resisted him.

"Whatever are we to do?" repeated Jem, touched by Eunice's look of concern. "I would go myself and look after him to-night. Susan and I could take it in turns, but there is no other room in the cottage for Mr. Desmond; there is not even a couch in the parlour."

"Oh, you couldn't do that," in a tone of conviction. Eunice was quite alarmed at the idea.

"I should do it if there was nothing else to be done," returned Jem quite fiercely; "and Mr. Desmond could roll himself in a rug before the kitchen fire. Do you suppose that I am going to let the darling die because he was not properly nursed? But I have thought of something else. Dr. Hilliard is going to Chez-Nous—Mrs. Pater has got a touch of influenza—and I will send off Andrew with a note and ask him to come round. Wait a moment, Eunice," and Jem bundled out of the room to despatch her messenger, returning in a few minutes breathless with haste.

"There, I have got it all as pat as possible," she continued as she plumped down in her easy-chair. "If the doctor gives us leave, we will wrap Billy up in blankets and put him into the carriage and bring him here. There is a little bed in the West Room that is always kept nicely aired for emergencies, and it shall be put in my room."

"Why not in mine?" For Eunice had not a word to say against the plan; even prudential reasons must give way if the child's life was in danger. "Dear Miss Jem,

do let me have him. I am so used to children, and I nursed Lot when he was ill." But Miss Jem would not hear of this for a moment.

"No, I am not going to part with him to any one," she said excitedly. "Billy is going to be my charge, and you and Susan shall help. Law, my dear, I am that fond of Billy that I would sit up with him a dozen nights and think it no trouble. But there is only the fire to keep up, and to give him warm drinks if he is restless, so I shall be able to lie down quite comfortably." And, seeing her determination, Eunice wisely said no more.

Jem was nearly in a fever herself before the doctor came, and then she was jubilant. Dr. Hilliard thought it an excellent plan, and called her a Good Samaritan. Jem set about her preparations at once, and the entire household were soon bustling round their mistress like working bees round their queen. Eunice would gladly have joined them, but Miss Jem had another errand for her.

"I want you to step up to the cottage and tell Mr. Desmond what we have arranged to do," she said briskly. "Tell him the carriage will be round in another hour or so, and that I shall be in it, and that I am going to carry off Billy, and that Dr. Hilliard approves of everything; and come back as quick as you can, Eunice, for I shall be dying to know how he takes it."

"Oh, I shall not be long," returned Eunice, hurrying away for fear her tell-tale face should betray her dislike to her errand. Some one must go, she knew that—but if only Miss Jem would have chosen another messenger!

But she was surprised, and not a little touched, by the way Mr. Desmond received Miss Jem's message. He turned rather pale, and did not speak for a minute. And Eunice, who felt embarrassed by his silence, enlarged on her theme. It would be the best plan—Billy would have every comfort—they would all nurse him, and so on.

"Yes, I know," he said hurriedly, walking to the window, so that Eunice could not see his face. "She is a

good woman, if ever there was one; and I have known very few good women in my life." He stopped, cleared his voice, and went on. "Tell her—tell Miss Durnford—that for Bill's sake I dare not refuse, but that I have no words to thank her." Then he turned round, and Eunice could see the muscles of his face were quivering with repressed emotion. "She shall do as she will with the boy. You may tell her that."

Jem fairly cried when Eunice narrated the little scene. "He was so grateful that he was quite overcome, and could hardly speak. I had no idea he was capable of so much feeling," went on Eunice, determined that her own prejudices should not prevent her from doing him justice.

"Oh, you do not know Mr. Desmond; he has never shown you his best side," replied Jem quietly, and somehow these few simple words made Eunice uncomfortable.

In spite of her fussiness Jem was really a capable woman, and in a very short time everything was ready for the little invalid, and the carriage, filled with rugs and blankets and well warmed by foot-warmers, was on its way to Honey Hanger.

Billy was too ill to take much notice; when he was placed in his comfortable bed he only laid his heavy head and flushed face on the pillow with a little sigh of content.

"Nice room," Eunice heard him murmur once to himself, and just as he seemed sinking into a doze and they were rousing him to give him some nourishment, he said suddenly, "Where's my dad?" for Mr. Desmond had carried out this branch of instruction most perseveringly, and Billy's pretty baby speech was a thing of the past.

"Dad is coming to-morrow, darling," rejoined Jem; "now you must go to sleep, like a dear. Eunice, we must go down and get a bit of dinner, and Susan will sit by him until I come back; I shall be thankful for half-an-hour's rest," she continued, "for I have been on my feet ever since luncheon." But in spite of her fatigue Jem's voice was cheery, and she looked supremely happy.

But the next day there was a return of the feverish

symptoms, and though Dr. Hilliard said little, he came every few hours; and Mr. Desmond, who called early and late to inquire after his boy, and was interviewed by Miss Jem herself, received very little comfort from his visits. Billy manifested no pleasure at seeing him, and only complained that his head hurt him. Jem's sore heart quite brimmed over with pity when she followed Mr. Desmond out of the room. "He is worse, you need not tell me that," he said, in a tone of repressed agitation.

"No, no, you must not say that," returned Jem, trying to reconcile truth and a very natural desire to make the best of things. "He is not so well, certainly, but Dr. Hilliard says we must expect ups and downs. It has done him no harm to move him—he has assured me of that—but he thinks"—here she hesitated and looked way —"that if it had been taken in time he would not have been so bad."

"You mean the blame's on my shoulder," returned Mr. Desmond, so harshly that Jem started. "Oh, don't spare me, Miss Durnford; it is only one more sin to add to the heap. Poor Bill! I have not been much of a father to him."

"Oh, Mr. Desmond, for pity's sake don't say such dreadful things," and there was a scared look in Jem's blue eyes. Then the hard, reckless expression on the man's face softened a little.

"But if they are true," he returned in a melancholy voice. "Listen to me, like the dear good creature you are, and let me make a clean breast of it. That day, when Bill shivered and wanted to stay at home because his head ached—oh, what a fool I was!"

"What do you mean?" asked Jem faintly; but she foresaw the answer.

"I was not in the best of tempers that morning, and the child aggravated me with his whining. I was a bit rough with him, I must own that, and would not let him stay at home—I thought he was shamming,—and then it rained before we got back."

Jem sighed. She knew all about it. Betty Prior had grumbled to her very freely on the subject.

"He was cross as two sticks that morning," she said, "and nothing the child did was right. I told him Billy had a cold, and that he ought not to stir from the fire, and that it was a bitter cold day, and he just laughed at me, and told him to fetch his hat. Billy was crying when he went out; but there, what was the good of my speaking."

"Of course, it was a mistake," returned Jem gently; "but it is no use thinking of that now, Mr. Desmond," looking timidly into the dark, handsome face. "I hate to think of your going back to brood over things by yourself. Why should you not stay and have some dinner along with Miss Cleveland and me? it might hearten you up, and the doctor will be here later on." But he shook his head.

"No, my kind friend," and here he took Jem's plump hand and pressed it almost tenderly. "I am not fit for any company but my own this evening. You are too merciful to tell me the truth, but all the same I can see it for myself; if I lose my boy I shall only have myself to blame for his death," and before Jem could answer he had wrung her hand quite fiercely and had gone.

Jem never spoke of this episode to any one, only during her wakeful night she thought very pityingly of the lonely man. "If he has done the mischief, and evil should come of it," she said to herself as she sat beside the child's bed, "it stands to reason that no one will be able to comfort him;" and then with wet eyes she stooped over Billy until her cheek rested against his fair hair, and often and fervently Jem prayed that night that Billy's life might be spared.

Jem's simple faith seldom failed. "I don't know how some folks live without praying," she said once to Eunice, "but I would as soon go without eating and drinking as miss my prayers;" for Jem with her childlike, practical piety was one of the little ones of the Kingdom.

Jem knew very little about theology or other people's religion. Hard questions baffled and depressed her. She had a firm belief that the Pope was Antichrist, and that the Anglican Church was the true Church, but beyond this her ignorance was surprising. She had no notion what Calvinist and Socinian meant, and Agnosticism was a sealed term to her. That people could be found who were so wicked as to believe that the world had made itself was so monstrous and inconceivable, that if Jem had had her will she would have had all sceptics treated as dangerous lunatics, to be confined at the will of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"I have no patience with such people," she would say. "I think it is wrong to let them loose about the world. Think of the harm they do."

"Jem's creed was beautifully simple. "If we love God we shall try to be good," she would say, "and if we are good we shall be happy. Perhaps," went on Jem thoughtfully, "if we prayed less and praised more we might be nearer the mark, for the way people take all their blessings as a matter of course is enough to make one shudder. Did I ever tell you about old Lizzie Pattington, Eunice?" for this speech had been addressed to her.

"I don't think so. I do not remember the name."

"Well, she is dead now, but I used to be very fond of Lizzie, and went to see her constantly. She was old and very infirm, but she was the dearest old body, though some folks said she was silly. She had a way of saying her prayers aloud—some old people do,—and one evening when I went later than usual and she was in her bed, she was just saying them, and I stayed behind the screen for a minute or so. Well, it was a lesson to me to hear her.

"'Dear Lord,' she was saying, 'what a deal I have to thank Thee for! I have my sight, and good sight too, and I am not hard of hearing either; and though I be crippled with rheumatiz I can get about famously on my sticks; and I am fine and hearty, thanks to Thy great

mercy, and have a good darter and plenty of food and clothes, not to mention the grand wood-pile that my son-in-law Joe has built;' but there, I have forgotten half. Think of that," continued Jem with sparkling eyes; "there was the dear old thing reckoning up her blessings one by one, and not asking for anything until she had finished them. Do you know, I was ready to cry with shame, Eunice, for I had never in my whole life thanked God for sight and hearing and the power to move my limbs. The angels must be sore affronted at us," concluded Jem; "we must seem like a pack of rude, ungrateful children in their eyes." And Eunice, who felt somewhat conscience-stricken, did not contradict this.

CHAPTER XX

"LITTLE MOTHER JEM"

> Now, God bless the child! Father, mother, respond.
> O Death! O Beyond!
> Thou art strange! Thou art sweet!
>
> —E. BARRETT BROWNING.

> Without love there is no interior pleasantness of life.
>
> —SWEDENBORG.

DURING the next two or three days there was very little improvement in the condition of the invalid. Dr. Hilliard was unremitting in his attentions, but declined to express an opinion. "It was impossible to say at present; the child was weakly and had been treated injudiciously, and his reserve of strength was very small; one must always wait and hope in such cases," he continued, "but he is in good hands now. Miss Durnford is an excellent nurse," And this was all that Mr. Desmond could elicit from him.

But even to Miss Jem Dr. Hilliard said little. "I hope we shall pull him through," he observed the third night, when he had paid his last visit. "Mind you, I will not promise—he is about as ill as he can be; but while there is life there is hope, and any minute he may take a turn for the better." And Jem hoarded up even this scanty crumb of comfort to retail to the anxious father.

Mr. Desmond almost lived at the Dene. He hung about the hall and morning-room at all hours of the day, but nothing would induce him to take a meal in the house. Jem used to go down to him, looking pale and heavy-eyed from want of sleep, with dishevelled fringe and tumbled wrapper, and give him the report of the night. The sight

of the odd little figure and touzled head seemed to affect him curiously.

"Oh, how tired you look!" he said once; "why are you wearing yourself out in this way? I am not worthy of such goodness, and you are so kind, so kind."

"Please do not say such things," returned Jem humbly; "we are none of us worthy, and there is little enough that I do in return for all my blessings. It seems to me," went on Jem very gently, "that there is nothing that one would not do for a little child; when I see him lying there, poor lamb—not able even to lift his dear hand, I feel as though I would be ready to take his place, if only his life would be spared."

Then Mr. Desmond looked at her rather strangely. "You ought to have been his mother," he said in rather a husky voice; and as Jem shrank back, rather startled by this, he continued hurriedly, "If Bill's mother had been a good woman like you, it would have been better for him and me too, but she cared little for either of us." And then before Jem could make up her mind what to say in answer to this painful statement, he had caught up his cap and had left the house.

When Lilian heard of the state of affairs at the Dene, she rode over to see Eunice. Miss Jem was unable to leave the sick-room.

"She is wearing herself out," observed Eunice sadly, but she will not listen to any one; she lets no one else do anything for Billy; and even when Susan takes her turn in the night, she will not consent to leave the room. I do not believe she has had an hour's unbroken sleep since Billy was brought here."

"Miss Jem is very strong, Eunice," replied Lilian. "I remember when Mr. Durnford was ill she never left his room night or day. Of course she broke down afterwards, but that was with grief as well as fatigue."

"It is rather hard, though, on Susan and me," and Eunice's voice was somewhat injured. "We would so gladly take our share of the nursing, but Miss Jem seems

quite jealous and put out if we offer to do anything. I do all I can for her outside—write notes and see visitors; and then there is always Mr. Desmond on one's hands; under the circumstances, one is obliged to be kind to him.

"I met him in the drive just now," returned Lilian. "I thought he looked ill and miserable, but as much like an Apollo as ever. What a strikingly handsome man he is! Now I must go, for I have to meet Douglas in the town. Give my love to dear Miss Jem, and don't worry more than you can help."

The following morning after this Eunice was awakened by the light of a candle flashed suddenly in her face, and started up in alarm. "Oh, Miss Jem, is he worse—is Billy worse?" she asked anxiously; but Jem shook her head.

"No, he is better, thank God! I have come to tell you so. I was just dropping off into a doze when Susan woke me, and said she was sure there was some sort of change. Oh, Billy is not going to die," continued Jem with her old beaming smile; "he is going to get well, and I am that happy I hardly know how to contain myself, though my legs are ready to drop off with fatigue. But there, I shall be able to rest now. When you are dressed, Eunice, you had better send a line to Mr. Desmond; Andrew will go round with it. Tell him that I am certain Billy has taken a turn for the better, and he is having a sweet sleep now." And then Jem dragged her weary little self back to the sick-room and hung over the sleeping child in a perfect ecstasy of joy and thankfulness.

When Dr. Hilliard came he corroborated Jem's report. "He will do now," he said curtly; "he has turned the corner; he only wants care and good nursing." And then he turned to Jem and told her rather sharply that he was busy enough, and did not want another patient on his hands.

"You will just lie down and have a good sleep, and Miss Cleveland and Susan will look after the boy," he said in quite a severe voice; and Jem was too worn out

to rebel at this. As she still refused to leave the room, Susan tucked her up cosily on a couch by the fire, with a screen round her, and she and Eunice soon had the satisfaction of seeing her in a sound sleep. Jem slept most of the day, and woke up quite refreshed in the evening; but as she still complained of her limbs aching, and Billy did not need her, Eunice easily persuaded her to lie still.

Jem looked supremely happy as she lay there in her smart tea-gown, watching Billy being fed like a baby; but her tired eyes had more than once a wistful look in them.

"What it must be to have a child of one's own!" she said with a little sigh when Eunice was sitting beside her. "When I was quite a little thing, dear—how mother used to laugh at the story!—I nearly cried my eyes out because she would not buy me a real live baby. There was one at the shop next to ours, and sometimes for a treat the mother would allow me to sit on a little stool and hold it for a bit. I must have been rather an old-fashioned little body in those days," went on Jem, "for I remember mother nudging father to look at me more than once, when I was busy hush-a-bying it, as I had seen the nurse do; and then it was I fretted and sulked, and would not be pacified, because mother would not buy me the baby. She got me a big doll instead, but I would not look at it. Dollie was not warm and cuddly like Mrs. Armstrong's baby, and I did not like her staring eyes. I was a spoiled little monkey, I am afraid; and after that father got me a white kitten, and then I was more content. Dear, what droll creatures children are! but would you believe it, Eunice, I was quite serious; and if ever I saw a baby in the street I would run to it and kiss it. 'Little Mother Jem,' father used to call me."

"I was always very fond of babies myself," returned Eunice, smiling at Jem's quaint story, "though I never wanted one of my own. But I remember how pleased and proud I was when Daisy was born, and Shirley told

me I had a niece. It was such a wonderful thing to know I was an aunt; it made me feel so grand and important;" but Jem made no immediate answer, and her eyes were fixed thoughtfully on Billy.

"Life's a bit puzzling," she said presently; "there are some women who would give ten years of their life if they could only have a child of their own; and there are other women, with their little ones round them, who are not even grateful for their blessings, and who would as lief be without them. Why," continued Jem rather excitedly, "it is just pearls before swine in some homes that I have seen."

"I am afraid you are right there, dear Miss Jem."

"Bless you, child, don't I know it? Have I not come across it again and again? and my blood always boils at the sight. That seems the worst of getting old when one is unmarried," and Jem's voice had a note of sadness in it. "You may have good health and plenty of money and kind friends, and yet at times it must be a bit lonely."

"Lucia thinks that every woman ought to marry," returned Eunice. "It is rather amusing to hear her; and then Shirley laughs at her, and quite crushes her by telling her how many more women there are than men, and asks how it is to be managed unless she recommends polygamy. I am afraid he takes a delight in trampling on her pet theories. He told her the other day that he meant to give Daisy as good an education as her brothers, that she might be able to earn her own living."

"That's downright sensible of him," returned Jem; "for one can never tell what may happen, and Daisy will be none the worse for a good education. I should not wonder," she continued thoughtfully, "if constant occupation and working for one's bread doesn't prevent some women from hankering after a different sort of life, and make them more content with themselves. But there, fancy my talking in this way to you, a young thing, with all your future before you!"

"Oh, but I may be a working woman all my life too," returned Eunice cheerily.

"Ah, you may so, but you don't believe it; don't I know what it is to be young?" and Jem gave her a playful little push. "It is just fairyland, and if you come to a closed door you never open it without thinking that something pleasant may happen, and that Mr. Right may be round the corner; and if it is Mr. Wrong," and here she nodded her head with a knowing look, "well, it can't be helped, and there's lots of time, and there are plenty more closed doors, and so on." And though Eunice laughed at this, she could not but own that Jem's quaint conceit was strangely true; for every morning she woke, feeling as though life was full of surprises, and that wonderful things might happen before night.

Billy's convalescence was a time of unmixed enjoyment to Jem; she was completely engrossed with the child, and would spend hours beside him, putting puzzles together, or playing some simple little games with him. Billy had so many toys that he was almost bewildered with the amount of his treasures, and would lie and look at them in a trance of childish beatitude.

"My Jemmy gived them to me every one," he said once to his father. Mr. Desmond looked quite scandalised at the familiarity.

"Upon my word, Bill!" he observed; but Miss Jem interposed.

"Now don't you be interfering between Billy and me," she said warningly. "He shall call me what he likes, bless him, for we are the best of friends, aren't we, darling?" Then the child put his wasted arms round her neck.

"Oh, I love my Jemmy, that I do," he whispered, hiding his little face against her shoulder.

And Jem hugged him in speechless ecstasy.

"And poor dad is out in the cold," returned Mr. Desmond, pretending to jest, but there was a slight cloud upon his brow. He was not a good man, and all his life

he had been hard and selfish, but in his own way he had loved his boy. He was very grateful to Jem, for he knew well that her care and devotion had saved Billy's life; but it was only natural he should feel a tinge of jealousy as he watched this little scene. He could not remember that Billy had ever put his arms round his neck; and somehow the thought galled him. Billy's illness, and his slow and protracted convalescence, made a considerable change in Eunice's plans, and she felt it would be utterly impossible for her to ask for a few days' leave at Christmas.

"It would not be right to ask it," she said in one of her home letters. "I have not been here three months yet; besides, I do not think Miss Jem could do without me, so we must just make the best of it." Strangely enough, Jem began talking on the subject that very evening.

"I expect you will be wanting to go home for Christmas," she said a little anxiously; "and I suppose I must try and spare you for a week," but Eunice interrupted her.

"You will do nothing of the kind," she returned hastily. "Do you imagine I am going to leave you with Billy on your hands? I have just written to Lucia and told her that they must do without me." Then Miss Jem looked immensely relieved.

"Well, I don't know what I should have done," she admitted candidly, "for you are a real comfort to me, Eunice, and you are a good girl to give it up and not make a trouble of it, your first Christmas too! Well, you shan't be a loser, for I will make it up to you somehow. I always do my summer shopping about Easter, and we will go up together to the Métropole and have a bit of fun, and see the theatres and the pictures, and have a drive or two in the Park to see the fashions; and then you can have a few days at the End House while I pay a visit to an old friend who lives at Norwich. She is a homely body," went on Jem, "but she knew father

and mother, and I always go to her for a week every year. I like to see the old place, and I always go and sit in our old shop, and ask to go into the little back-parlour. It is as good as a sermon," finished Jem, "and keeps me from being proud and set up with all my fine things, when I remember what humble folks we were in those days, and how father used to stand behind the counter in his apron and shirt-sleeves, before Durnford's soap brought in the money."

"Dear Miss Jem, how good you are! I wish other people were like you," for Eunice's conscience told her how differently she would have acted in Jem's position; "most people would have turned their backs for ever on that humble shop in Market Place, and never entered it again." There was something touching in Jem's pious pilgrimage year after year; it showed a sound, true nature unspoilt by riches. Jem never gave herself airs, never seemed ashamed of her humble origin, or pretended to be a fine lady, and perhaps this was why such people as Douglas and Lilian Hilton loved and honoured her. Jem was not indifferent to Eunice's girlish reverence, though she laughed and turned it off the next moment.

"Bless me, how you do talk! but I am not conceited enough to believe you. Well, I shall be glad to have you with me, Eunice, and Lilian will say amen to that. I always dine at Monkbarn on Christmas Day, and of course I shall take you with me. Douglas thinks a deal of keeping up old customs, and he has a boar's-head and a wassail-bowl. Billy will be better by that time, and I can leave him with Susan." And somehow the prospect of spending Christmas at Monkbarn consoled Eunice largely for her disappointment.

Miss Jem had some other charming plans in her head, which she unfolded the next day.

"The quarter is not quite due, but I am going to pay you your money, Eunice," she said as she handed her quite a goodly little pile of shining sovereigns; "for of course you will be wanting to buy presents for your home

people. I am going to send them a hamper myself, and you shall help me pack it. I have always two or three turkeys sent me, and your brother shall have the biggest."

"Miss Jem!" and it was good to see Eunice's face.

"Oh, don't stand there Miss Jem-ing me," returned Jem in high good-humour. "Just put that money in your pocket and listen to me a moment. I can't be leaving Billy myself till he is a bit stronger, so I am going to ask Lilian to go with you to Shelgate. Lilian dearly loves a day's shopping, and she is a famous hand at making bargains. I shall get her to do some commissions for me; she is coming over this afternoon, and we will talk to her about it. You will have to have your luncheon and tea there, and I will have a late supper, for you would never get back in time for dinner."

When Lilian arrived she was almost as charmed with the plan as Eunice was, and was ready to execute any amount of commissions.

"I have done all my Christmas business," she said joyously; "so I shall be able to give Eunice my full attention. Now you must both make out your lists, and when Douglas comes in to fetch me we will ask which day he can spare me."

Douglas was unusually late in making his appearance, so Lilian insisted on going upstairs to put on her things so as not to keep him waiting; but she and Eunice found so much to say to each other on every item of Eunice's carefully prepared list, that Miss Jem had given Douglas his tea and had had quite a long chat with him before they appeared.

"And we never knew he was in the house," observed Lilian. Eunice said nothing, but she looked a little disappointed, for of course now he could not stay a minute.

"Don't keep him, girls, for he is rather in a hurry," Jem said in her brisk, decided way. "We have had our talk and settled everything; the day after to-morrow will suit him best; and as he has some business in Shelgate, he is going with you."

"Are you really, Douglas? how delightful!" and Lilian looked at her brother with sparkling eyes. "We shall both be glad to have him, shall we not, Eunice?"

"Speak for yourself, Lil," returned Douglas; "and don't put awkward questions to Miss Cleveland; even if she is not pleased, she will feel herself bound to put up with my company."

"But I am pleased," returned Eunice, laughing; but she flushed a little under his mischievous glance. And then, when the brother and sister had hurried off, she ran upstairs to prepare for dinner with pulses quite quivering with excitement. What a delightful day they would have! The thought of her well-filled purse, of the presents she would get, and the pleasure of her friends' company, made her heart beat more rapidly. What was it Miss Jem had said that night about being young?

"It is just fairyland, and if you come to a closed door you never open it without thinking something pleasant may happen, and——" oh, what nonsense! and Eunice grew suddenly red as she remembered the rest of Miss Jem's sentence.

CHAPTER XXI

"CLOSED DOORS AND FAIRYLAND"

To exist is to bless. Life is happiness. In this sublime pause of things all dissonances have disappeared. It is as though creation were but one vast symphony glorying the God of Goodness with an inexhaustible wealth of praise and harmony. We have ourselves become notes in the great concert, and the soul breaks the silence of ecstasy only to vibrate in unison with the Eternal Joy.—AMIEL.

IT is rarely that anticipation of any pleasure is fully realized, yet when Eunice and Lilian wished each other good-night at the Dene gates on their return from Shelgate they mutually agreed that they had never spent a happier day. To Eunice everything was novel and delightful. She remembered how often she and Daisy had walked miles at Christmas time, just to look in at the shop-windows in Sloane Street and Piccadilly, and how difficult they had found it to lay out those few shillings to the best advantage, so that the children's Santa Claus stockings should be well filled.

And now she was a woman of means, with her quarter's salary of twenty pounds at her disposal, and no one could find fault with her for buying useful presents for her dear ones.

Lilian's help was invaluable to her; she was so clever and painstaking, she knew at once what Eunice needed, and never wasted the saleswoman's time or her own by turning over wares unnecessarily, and she had such good taste and discrimination. She was so patient, too, and seemed to take as much interest in Eunice's purchases as though they had been her own; and it was she who suggested that Douglas would be the best judge of the

football with which Eunice intended to gladden the hearts of her elder nephews.

Douglas was a model squire of dames; he effaced himself when his services were not required, and always turned up at the right moment.

Miss Jem had given him stringent orders to take the girls to the best pastry-cook's in Shelgate and give them a good luncheon; and at the appointed hour he met them there, and ushered them into a low, dark panelled room over the shop, with a bow-window jutting over the street, where they could sit and look down at the passers-by.

What a merry little luncheon it was, and how they laughed and talked like light-hearted children who were out for a holiday; and what absurd jokes Douglas made! Never had he seemed in greater spirits, and yet there was an air of mystery about him that was extremely provoking.

He was very inquisitive on the subject of Eunice's purchases, and wanted to peep into all the parcels; but he could not be induced to say a word about the business that had taken him to Shelgate.

It was very important, he observed with some solemnity, and as he had a good deal on his mind—here he looked rather meaningly at Lilian—he must beg the ladies to excuse him; but at half-past four they might rely on it that he and tea and hot muffins should be awaiting them.

"Then in that case we had better be off too, Eunice," remarked Lilian briskly, "for I have not begun Miss Jem's things yet, and we must not lose our train," and then they hurried off; and Eunice watched her friend admiringly as she quickly and effectively worked off Miss Jem's list.

Everything was finished by tea-time, and they had nearly an hour to rest and amuse themselves. Douglas had asked carelessly if the youngsters cared for sweets, and Eunice had innocently described to him how she and Lucia always put packets of sugar-plums in Judy's and

Lot's stockings; but she did not add that the sugar-plums were of the humblest description.

Her feelings may be imagined then, when, as they were about to leave the shop, Douglas brought her a box of French bonbons and another full of splendid crackers. "You can just put these into the hamper," he said in an off-hand way; "there are plenty to go round, so Miss Judy can get her share." Eunice was terribly embarrassed; one glance at the box of bonbons told her that it must have cost a good deal.

"Oh, Lilian, do come here," she exclaimed in a distressed tone; "please tell your brother he must not do such things; the children have so much already—and, indeed, I cannot take it," and here Eunice looked appealingly at Douglas's solemn and impassive face.

"What is the use of my saying anything?" returned Lilian, much amused at her friend's embarrassment. "I might talk myself hoarse, but it would make no difference. Douglas always has his own way in the end—you would soon find that out if you lived with him, Eunice. You will have to take the bonbons with a good grace," and this was all the consolation that Lilian could give her.

"He had no right to buy such an expensive present," Eunice said later that evening to Miss Jem. They had finished supper, and the girl, with pleased, excited looks, was exhibiting her wonderful purchases.

"Lor', my dear, what a fuss you do make about a trifle!" returned Jem in a matter-of-fact tone. "Douglas isn't poor by any means; he can well afford to spend his money on sugar-plums. Why shouldn't he do a good-natured thing if he likes?" and after this Eunice tried to forget her scruples. It was really very pretty to see her bright face as she brought out her treasures for Miss Jem's inspection. There was the beautiful little muff for Lucia, because she felt the cold so much, and her old one was too shabby to use; and the dozen fine handkerchiefs for Shirley, and the gold bangle for Daisy. "She did so long for a bangle," observed Eunice, rather apolo-

getically; "and Lucia could never have bought her one. I daresay Shirley will think it weak of me when she wants useful things; but I knew how it would please her."

"To think of that!" ejaculated Miss Jem, "and I could have given you half-a-dozen and never missed them, and you could have saved your money." But Eunice took no notice of this remark.

"The football is for the three boys, Frank, Cecil, and Jock," she continued. "Mr. Hilton chose it, and it cost a lot of money; oh, how delighted they will be! The doll is for Judy—I am going to dress it so prettily—and the horse and cart is for Lot; these are just some warm gloves and stockings, and that is all," finished Eunice, feeling she had been somewhat reckless in her expenditure.

"Well, and I am sure that they are all as nice as nice can be," returned Miss Jem. "And so you bought nothing for yourself?"

"Oh, I had no time to think of my own wants," returned Eunice, laughing; but she had already entrusted to Rachel's care a pretty little fern-pot, which was to be smuggled upstairs before Miss Jem could see it.

"Well, we will see about that hamper to-morrow," was Miss Jem's parting speech that night; "and if you are not too tired with all this gadding about, you shall help me pack it." And Jem kept her word.

Jem's notion of a Christmas hamper was simply magnificent; the big kitchen-table was quite covered with good things. The turkey kept company with a small, nicely cured ham, and dozens of the famous Disborough sausages. Then there were rolls of firm yellow butter from Friars' Farm, and a big jar of honey; a pot of Mrs. Compton's mincemeat, and a large Christmas cake, covered with frosted sugar, and "A Merry Christmas" picked out in pink sugar-plums; while every crevice of the hamper was filled up with ginger-bread nuts and rosy-cheeked apples.

Great was the excitement at the End House when this princely hamper was unpacked. It was recorded in the family legends that Lot sat down on the ground with his round eyes fixed on the apples, and asked Judy in an awestruck whisper, "if them welly big apples had comed from the Garden of Eden;" but then Biblical games are apt to bewilder childish intellects.

Shirley was a little nearer the truth when he described Lucia shedding tears over the turkey. "Indeed, I could not help crying," Lucia wrote, "but it was more for the kind thought than the turkey, though I never saw a finer one in my life. Your Miss Jem must be a sweet, good woman to do such lovely things. Oh, how grateful I am to her—not only for this, but for making my dear little sister so happy!" Jem's eyes were rather dim when she read her own and Eunice's letters; and though she pretended to laugh at all this fuss, Eunice could see that she was extremely gratified.

Christmas was always a very cheerful, bustling time at the Dene. There were other hampers to pack besides the one destined for the End House, and there were toys and good things for the Crippled Children's Home, and packets of tea and tobacco and other comforts for the Workhouse; besides really handsome presents for all the servants and retainers.

To add to Eunice's pleasure, they had real Christmas weather—clear, frosty days, when the roads were like iron, and lovely moonlight nights; days when, to the young and robust, the keen strong air was like the elixir of life, when movement was joy, when the hoar-frost garlanded the hedgerows with fairy fringes, and the narrow country lanes were transformed into wonderful mysterious paths that seemed to lead to an enchanted land.

For a few hours the white earth looked as though she were reborn, and trailed her pure and spotless robe over the silent fields, as though to pay homage to the angels of the Nativity; when the thought of the Syrian

shepherds of old sleeping out on the snowy hills seemed to harmonise with the starlight. Eunice was almost too excited to sleep on Christmas Eve; she and the servants had been busy all day decorating the hall and dining-room, and in the evening the choir-boys from the Minster had come up to sing carols, and to be regaled with hot elder-wine and mince-pies—an old custom at the Dene. The servants, too, had a grand supper, and received their presents.

"Peace and good-will," murmured Eunice, as she opened her window for a moment. "I never realised those words so strongly before. Oh, what a beautiful world it is, and how good one ought to be!" And that night Eunice prayed as she had never prayed before.

They were to attend early service at the little church near the Dene, and to go later on to the Minster. It was quite dark when they sallied forth, escorted by Andrew and a lantern; but the sun had risen by the time the service was over, and the sky was flecked with pink clouds, although the moon still lingered.

"We will take Billy his presents when we have had our breakfast," observed Jem as she poured out the coffee. "Susan says he is hardly awake yet. There's the parcel his father left for him yesterday." For to Eunice's secret relief Mr. Desmond had gone to spend Christmas with an old friend, and would be away for a day or two. Eunice rarely saw Mr. Desmond, though he still came to the Dene every day, as Billy was still very weak. Jem had fitted up a cosy room for his use near her own, and here he spent his days playing happily with his toys and a family of kittens. As Jem was generally busy in the morning, Mr. Desmond paid his visits later, and so he seldom missed her; but he never stayed long. Jem would come downstairs with him and let him out herself, and sometimes they would stand by the hall fire chatting for a long time about the boy; but Jem rarely spoke of these visits, or else mentioned them very casually.

"Mr. Desmond was speaking about Billy going back

to him," she said once, "but he won't begin that subject again in a hurry," pursing up her lips. "Why, the cottage is as draughty as it can be, so I wanted to know what he meant by talking such nonsense, and that he need not think I was going to part with Billy yet."

"And what did he say?" asked Eunice curiously; but to her dismay Miss Jem turned rather red and seemed embarrassed.

"Oh, he talked a lot of rubbish," she returned hastily; "about being grateful and that sort of thing; but I told him it was just selfishness on my part, and that I did not desire his fine speeches. I do hate the thought of giving him up," she continued almost tearfully; "but there, what is the good of crossing the bridge till you come to it, as Susan says."

Eunice could scarcely find time to eat her breakfast, for a perfect budget of home letters awaited her, and there was a little parcel directed to her in Lucia's handwriting. "To our dear little sister—from Shirley and Lucia," was on the paper inside, and there was a pretty little glove-case with her initials in gold. "It is only a trifle, dear," wrote Lucia, "and Shirley has been grumbling about it dreadfully because he wanted you to have something really nice, but I told him that you would not measure our affection by gifts, and indeed there is very little money to spare for anything just now; but I think you will find it useful." And Daisy, too, had worked a bookmarker, and sent it to dear Auntie with love.

Miss Jem was much pleased with her fern-pot, though she scolded Eunice for spending her money on her. "I am only waiting for you to finish your breakfast," she continued in rather a fidgety manner, "before I give you mine. We shall find it in the hall, for I told Rachel to put it there."

"Oh, I have quite finished," returned Eunice, starting up from her chair. Then Miss Jem preceded her with an important air.

"There, now, I hope you will be pleased, my dear,"

she said heartily, and Eunice, to her intense astonishment, saw a beautiful bicycle of the most modern construction, and with all the latest improvements, with a label hanging to the handles, whereon was scrawled in Jem's unmistakable calligraphy—"To Eunice, with Jem Durnford's love and good wishes." Eunice looked ready to cry. The present was so magnificent that it almost took her breath away. "Oh, Miss Jem! Miss Jem!" was all she could say, and then she hugged her fiercely.

Jem laughed and patted her fringe, which had become slightly disarranged under this treatment.

"Now, don't you say another word," she returned in her comfortable way. "I have always meant to get you that machine when I saw how clever you were in learning to ride. Douglas chose it for me. Oh, Miss Curiosity, now you know the business that took him to Shelgate. He has done his commission famously, for even Lilian declares it is a beauty, and she is a good judge."

"Oh, Lilian was in the secret, was she?" asked Eunice in rather a bewildered voice.

"Why, of course she was," returned Miss Jem. "Fancy Douglas keeping anything from her! They were as pleased as possible, both of them. Well, now, we must not keep Billy waiting any longer. He has emptied his Santa Claus stocking by this time, and will be wondering what's become of us."

As they were not to start for Monkbarn until four o'clock, they spent the earlier part of the afternoon playing with Billy. Indeed, Jem seemed to find it difficult to tear herself away from the child when the carriage was announced, but Eunice's eyes were bright with excitement as the horses' hoofs rang out on the frosty road.

"There is nothing to be compared to Christmas in the country," she exclaimed; and when they reached their destination, and the carriage drove under the old archway, even Miss Jem expressed her admiration, for Monkbarn looked like a huge Christmas card, with its white roof

sparkling in the starlight, and the light streaming from the open door and uncurtained windows. As the carriage stopped, Douglas opened the door and assisted them to alight, while Lilian, in her pretty velveteen dress, stood within the porch to welcome them. "A happy Christmas, dear Miss Jem, and to you too, Eunice," and then they were taken upstairs to the cosy, old-fashioned guest-room, where a fire had been blazing all the afternoon, and wax-candles on the toilet-table.

Miss Jem was gorgeous in a green brocaded silk that could have almost stood alone with richness, and she wore her favourite ruby necklace; but Eunice had nothing to put on but her pink blouse and black grenadine skirt that she had worn already several times. "It is no use troubling about it," she had said to herself earlier that afternoon. "Lilian knows how it is;" for since her quarter's salary had been paid there had been no time to get the new evening dress that she needed so urgently. "You look very nice, dear," observed Lilian, answering her unspoken thought. "Pink always suits you," and then she fastened a beautiful spray of stephanotis and maidenhair at her throat. "Now, I must give you our little Christmas remembrances before you go downstairs, though Miss Jem deserves nothing"—looking at her severely—"for her presents to us have quite taken the shine out of our little gift."

"Lor', my dear, how can you say so?" returned her friend, looking admiringly at the little Indian silver tea-caddy. "It is just what I wanted, and is quite lovely."

"Will you accept this little remembrance from us both, Eunice?" and Lilian put in her hand a pretty little Russia-leather travelling-desk fitted up for use.

"From you and your brother?" stammered Eunice, scarcely able to believe her ears.

"Well, to tell you the truth," remarked Lilian in her candid way, "I had made up my mind to get the desk myself, and then Douglas interfered and said he could not be left out in the cold in that way, and that it was to

be from him too. Every one gives presents to everybody at Christmas, and no one thinks anything of it," finished Lilian rather vaguely. But Miss Jem, who had seemed a little surprised at the gift, nodded her head as though she had grasped Lilian's meaning. "Yes, of course," she said, "so we will just go down and thank him, Eunice, and tell him he is a good fellow." And the green brocade rustled away with Miss Jem inside it, and Eunice, with hot cheeks and downcast eyes, followed her closely.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FRIARS' HALL

Have you done your wassail? It is a handsome, drowsy ditty, I assure you.—BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

Let us never be afraid of innocent joy. . . . We must dare to be happy, and dare to confess it, regarding ourselves as the depositaries, not as the authors, of our own joy.—AMIEL.

DOUGLAS received Miss Jem's thanks with perfect complacency, but when Eunice tried to utter a few shy words he pretended to be greatly alarmed.

"Now, please don't try to be proper, Miss Cleveland," he exclaimed. "Of course, you are dreadfully shocked at the liberty I have taken, but even young ladies have to conform to custom."

"To custom!" Eunice was clearly puzzled.

"Perhaps we are a little behind the times at Shepperton and Medfield," he continued blandly. "We keep up all sorts of obsolete old fashions—antiquated, patriarchal traditions. The minds of man, woman, and child at Christmas-time turn solely on Christmas boxes and Christmas gifts. I believe they are still common in other parts of England, but at Medfield and in the environs of Monkbarn the Santa Claus disease passes all bounds. I dare not look at a baby in its cradle for fear it should wink at me with its infant eye and hold out its dimpled hand for a silver coin."

"Well, now, to think of that!" ejaculated Miss Jem, whose credulity was easily imposed upon.

"I could not have eaten my dinner," went on Douglas solemnly, "I could not have carved the turkey for fear my hand should have lost its cunning, if I had failed in my duty as master of the house on Christmas Day, for so

it is written in the Records of Monkbarn—every stranger who partakes of the hospitality thereof shall receive a Christmas gift of much or little value as seemeth good to the heritor or owner of the said Monkbarn and the liege lady."

"The foolish fellow means, Eunice," observed Lilian in her sensible way, "that, as I said before, at Christmas every one gives presents to everybody else, and it is taken as a matter of course. Now, as dinner is ready, we will not keep it waiting." And then Douglas, with a profound bow, offered his arm to Miss Jem.

Dinner on Christmas Day was never a prolonged function at Monkbarn, and directly the fine old Stilton cheese had been removed Lilian rose and led the way to the Friars' Hall, where they found the prettiest dessert laid out on the oak table.

The servants always dine as soon after us as possible, and will not make their appearance until it is time to bring out tea," Lilian explained to Eunice. "We shall be left in peace to roast chestnuts, or tell stories, or amuse ourselves in any way we like." And then they gathered round the fire, where a huge pine log was blazing and crackling; and Douglas filled the ladies' glasses with some fine old port wine, that had been hoarded for years in the bins of Monkbarn.

"We always have two toasts," he said quietly, when Eunice was about to object to this. "We drink to our noble selves, and God bless us all; and then all absent friends, and good luck to them." And then with much solemnity these toasts were drunk standing.

No one was inclined to roast chestnuts; and as every one voted for a story, Douglas searched his memory for some legends of the Friars. He was an excellent *raconteur*, and knew how to interest his listeners. To be sure, his stories were a little creepy, and Eunice nestled closer to Lilian on the old high-backed settle, for dark shadows seemed hovering round them beyond the fireside brightness, and in dusky corners strange shapes as of

cowled figures seemed to lurk, or glide stealthily behind screens. Lilian turned with a smile as she felt the girl's hand on her dress. "Look," she whispered, "Miss Jem is asleep," for the warmth and Douglas's sonorous voice had made Jem drowsy; she slept so soundly that she never woke until the servants were bringing in the tea. "I think I must have had forty winks," she observed innocently, "for I never heard the end of the story." But this explanation was received with a shout of laughter.

"You have been asleep for a good hour, and Douglas has quite talked himself hoarse," observed Lilian; "but you looked so comfortable we had not the heart to wake you. Now we must have tea, and then it will be time for the carols." For it was the custom at Monkbarn for all the household servants, and many of the men and boys on the farm, to join in the singing of carols on Christmas night.

In a short time the table was cleared and Lilian placed herself at the harmonium, and quite a goodly number of men and maids trooped in and took their places, led by a white-headed old ploughman who had worked at Friars' Farm as boy and man for more than sixty years, and who was now pensioned and lived in comfort in one of his master's cottages with a married granddaughter and her husband. The granddaughter was there with her baby, a wide-awake baby too, who stared at the firelight as though he were determined to investigate for all time the mystery of light.

And if any of the old Friars were there to hear, they must have been ravished by the harmony; for these simple country lads and lasses had been well trained by their young mistress, and sang exceedingly well, especially Ned Transome the cow-boy, who had the fresh clear notes of the lark, and sang in the church choir, and the pretty parlour-maid, Rhoda, who had a sweet little voice of her own.

Douglas and Lilian joined in the carols, but Eunice

listened spellbound. "Peace and good-will," she murmured again to herself, and her heart was very full, and almost unconsciously the tears gathered in her eyes. It was just then that Douglas raised his eyes from his book and saw her; the sweet uplifted expression of the girl's face long haunted him; but the next moment he ceased to sing, and his features became a little set, as though some grave thought harassed him.

"Eleven o'clock! bring in the wassail-bowl, Phineas," he said presently; and the old serving-man, who had been his father's coachman, brought in with due solemnity a huge china bowl, filled with hot spiced claret, and this, with slices of rich Christmas cake, was handed round.

Eunice did not dare refuse her portion, but she slipped it into Ned's ever-ready hand, and old Martin Goodenough, the patriarchal ploughman, willingly finished her glass as well as his own. "To the master, God bless him," he mumbled, "and a long life and health to him." "To the master and our young mistress too," was echoed through the hall. But it was Ned—saucy, rosy-cheeked Ned—who struck up with flute-like notes, "For he is a jolly good fellow, and so say all of us;" but on Christmas night, when a steaming wassail-bowl has been just emptied, some licence is permissible, and Douglas and Lilian only smiled, well pleased at their retainers' enthusiasm.

When the hall was cleared, Jem and Eunice went upstairs to prepare for their drive home. "Oh, how lovely it has been!" exclaimed Eunice; "why cannot such days last for ever?"

"So they do in memory," returned Lilian with unusual thoughtfulness; "nothing good ever really ends. Yes, it has been a nice day; there has not been a jar or hitch." But Eunice wondered why Lilian looked a little sad as she said this.

Miss Jem and Lilian had lingered in the corridor for a few parting words, so Eunice left them and went down alone.

Now, the staircase was dark and twisted, and the oak was a little slippery; perhaps Eunice was not taking proper heed, for her foot slipped, and she would have had an awkward tumble and probably sprained her ankle, only Douglas, who was waiting for her at the foot of the staircase, caught her in his arms.

"Have you hurt yourself, dear—Miss Cleveland?" Never had hyphen been so long, never had sentence been more lamely finished; but though Douglas flushed over his own awkwardness, he still held her as though he feared some injury, for Eunice looked paler than he had ever seen her.

"Oh, no," very shyly, "I have only given myself a shaking, for you saved me from falling; thank you so much." And then Eunice released herself, as Lilian came running down to know what was the matter.

"My foot slipped when I was half-way," explained Eunice, "but your brother broke my fall, or I am afraid, but for him, I should have landed in the hall."

"And it has given you a fright, and no wonder," and Lilian looked at her rather anxiously, for Eunice had not regained her colour. "Sit down, dear, and keep quiet; the carriage is not round yet."

"It is a mercy Douglas was so quick," observed Jem fussily. "I always told you, Lilian, that there would be an accident some day, the staircase is so dark, and there is an awkward turn that one might overlook. I always go down in terror of my life."

"Araby had a nasty tumble one night—do you remember, Douglas?" and Lilian looked at her brother. "No one was near enough to help her, and she was sadly bruised; she always declared one of the ghostly old Friars gave her a push."

"It was most likely her ridiculous high-heeled shoes," returned Douglas dryly. "Miss Cleveland, I hope you are more sensible." Then, for answer, Eunice put out a neatly-shod foot, that was as inoffensive as it was pretty.

"Do you feel all right now?" was Douglas's parting question as he drew up the carriage rugs and tucked them in cosily.

"Yes, perfectly right, thank you," but a cold little hand returned his warm good-night grasp. It was rather a mercy, Eunice thought, that Jem was too tired and sleepy to talk, and that she was left to indulge in her own reflections.

No, she could not forget it, the way he had caught her to him, and held her fast, and then those words, "Have you hurt yourself, dear?"—for even Eunice's innocence and inexperience could not doubt that "Miss Cleveland" was only an afterthought; and how he had looked at her, as though he really cared.

"I must not think about it—I will not—it is not right or maidenly," but Eunice strove vainly to keep this resolution.

"Well, I am dead sleepy, and that's the fact," observed Jem as they went upstairs; "so we will keep our talk for to-morrow. Why, how hot your face is, Eunice! and you look as wide-awake as possible, though you were up so early too." And then Jem went off to kiss Billy, and to hasten into her warm bed; but Eunice kept her fire company until it grew low and the wintry chill made itself felt, and then she too took refuge in her pillows.

Eunice was not the only one who kept vigil that Christmas night. Long after Lilian had left him Douglas Hilton sat in the Friars' Hall looking at the smouldering log embedded in the red glowing ashes, and thinking out some difficult problem.

The old grandfather's-clock had chimed three before he lighted his candle and rose from his seat. At the foot of the staircase he paused.

"She did not notice," he muttered; "I am sure of that. If she did she would only have thought it a slip of the tongue, and I recovered myself at once. She is too simple and natural, and I have never given her cause to think"—— and then he checked himself with a sigh, and

walked softly down the corridor so as not to disturb Lilian.

The next few days passed peacefully and happily at the Dene. Douglas Hilton did not call, though Eunice had secretly expected him; but the following morning Lilian bicycled over to Shepperton to inquire if Eunice were the worse for her accident, and carried back a good report to her brother. Douglas was very busy, she explained. He expected to be summoned to London in a day or two, and as he had several engagements he would be unable to pay his respects to the ladies. Mr. Desmond was still away, but Jem had a letter from him. She did not show it to Eunice, though she told her most of the contents.

"He says he is helping Mr. Chappel with a catalogue he is making, and he will probably stay another week or ten days," remarked Jem as she replaced the letter in its envelope. "He seems to be quite enjoying himself. He says the house is comfortable, and the place interesting; and as Billy is off his mind, the change will do him good."

"Did he say Mr. Chappel was an old friend?" asked Eunice a little curiously.

"He has known him a year or two, I believe," replied her friend. "He met him in Germany; he is a rich, crotchety old bachelor, who gets on with few people; but from what I gathered I think Mr. Desmond was kind to him when he was ill."

"I wish we knew more about Mr. Desmond," observed Eunice.

"And so we shall before long," replied Jem with a conscious look. "He is going to tell me a lot about himself when he gets the chance. You see, Billy is always with me, and he can't talk before the child." And then Jem bustled off with her tea-caddy, leaving Eunice as usual to find occupation for herself.

On the last day of the year Eunice went to the afternoon service at the Minster, and brought back two items of news with which to enliven the tea-table.

"Do you know Miss Pater has come home?" she began at once, before she had even taken off her gloves.

Miss Jem, who was pouring out the tea, paused for a moment in her surprise. "Araby back! Well, to be sure, she is sudden in her movements. Why, Mrs. Pater was telling me on Thursday that she was going to stop at Brighton for another ten days."

"Oh, she has altered her mind," returned Eunice. "Mrs. Pater was at the Minster, and we walked back together, and she was very chatty and told me a lot of things."

"And when did Araby arrive?"

"Oh, late yesterday evening, just as they were sitting down to dinner. She looked well, and had quite a colour, so the change has done her good. Mrs. Pater says she will bring her round to see us very soon."

"I think I ought to be calling at Chez-Nous," returned Miss Jem, "or madam will be giving me the rough side of her tongue. Billy has been taking up all my time, and I am afraid I have neglected my neighbours. Perhaps I will call there to-morrow afternoon. If you had not been bicycling over to Medfield I would have taken you with me."

"Lilian does not expect me; there is no need for me to go," replied Eunice, feeling that she had no right to dispose of her time without reference to her employer. "Any day would do just as well."

"But any day won't be New Year's Day," remarked Jem, "and very likely Lilian will be all alone. Mind, if she wants you to stay to luncheon you are not to trouble about Billy and me. I will go and get that call over, and then we will have a comfortable evening. There is nothing like making a good resolution and keeping it on New Year's Day, and I am afraid I have treated Mrs. Pater a bit shabbily."

"She did not seem to think so," replied Eunice. "Oh, by the bye, she is expecting her brother, Major Ford, very shortly. Do you know him, Miss Jem?"

"Lor' bless you, child, every one in Shepperton knows the Major. He is rather a favourite in these parts, and he is a good-hearted little fellow, too;" but Eunice, who was just then giving the dogs their tea, lost the latter part of this sentence.

"Mrs. Pater seems very proud of him," she went on. "'My brother the Major,' appears a grand personage in her eyes. She says I am not to be surprised at the difference between them, and that big, stout men often have little women for sisters, and that she always feels like a midget beside him."

"What's that you are saying about the Major?" asked Miss Jem in a perplexed tone.

Then Eunice repeated her words. "It is quite absurd to see them together, Mrs. Pater said, and then she asked me if I felt afraid of big men who spoke in deep bass voices."

Miss Jem's blue eyes had a vexed expression. "Don't you believe it," she said angrily, "it is only one of madam's monkey-tricks. She wants to get a laugh out of you. Why, the Major is a little, insignificant man, and he is not much taller than Mrs. Tina herself, and he has got sandy hair that looks like a scrubbing-brush, and a droll little moustache, and half-shut eyes that never seem to see anything. But he is not a bad little fellow for all that, and they say that he is every inch a soldier; but to see him strutting beside the Captain!" And here Miss Jem laughed, but for once Eunice did not join in her friend's merriment.

A practical joke rarely affects us until it is played on ourselves, and Eunice rather resented these absurd misstatements on Mrs. Pater's part.

"I don't think it was nice of her to tell me all that rubbish about her brother," she said presently. "I should have felt so awkward and foolish when he was introduced to me. I could never have concealed my surprise properly."

"Bless you, that is just what the little minx wanted,"

returned Miss Jem indignantly, "but you will be beforehand with her. I hope I shall be there when you make acquaintance with the Major, for it will be a treat to see Mrs. Tina's face—'This is my brother, Major Ford, Miss Cleveland.' Oh, I can hear her say it, and then you will be smiling as cool as possible, and not turning a hair, and won't she be just riled at the failure of her trick!" And here Miss Jem laughed till the tears ran down her face.

CHAPTER XXIII

"AND IF IT SHOULD BE MR. WRONG?"

> Can you cheerfully lay down
> Careless girlhood's flowery crown,
> And thus take up . . .
> Womanhood's meek cross?
>
> —MULOCK.

Regret is a woman's natural food; she thrives on it.—*Sweet Lavender.*

EUNICE would never have planned her expedition to Medfield if she had not believed that Douglas Hilton was in London. She had no idea that he had returned earlier than he had been expected, and that only the merest accident prevented them from meeting in the village.

Douglas, who was on his way to Shepperton, had stopped at the Forge to give a message from the bailiff. Eunice as she rode past saw his bicycle without recognising it, and Nigger, who usually mounted guard over it, had followed his master inside. She had only just turned the corner when they both came out, attended by the blacksmith.

The pretty parlour-maid, Rhoda, who admitted Eunice, told her that her mistress was in the white parlour, and as usual she refused to be announced. She loved to surprise Lilian, and to hear her pleased exclamation as she rose to welcome her friend, so she tapped at the door in her usual fashion, and without waiting for an answer stole into the room. Perhaps she was quiet in her movements, for Lilian had certainly not heard her. She was standing by the window with her back towards her, and though the table was strewn with work she seemed doing nothing.

Eunice was quite close to her before she turned round. "Oh, how you startled me!" she exclaimed. But Eunice looked far more startled, for it was evident to her that Lilian had been crying—her eyes were red and swollen. She tried to summon up a smile as Eunice looked at her anxiously; but it was rather a failure.

"Dear Lilian, what is it?—are you unwell, is anything troubling you?" Eunice held her fast, so there was no escape.

"I am well," returned her friend; "but I am not quite myself. I wish—I wish you had not come to find me like this"—here her lip quivered. "It is so wrong—to cry—but I could not help it; my heart felt so full and achy." And here, to Eunice's dismay, Lilian sat down on the window-seat and, hiding her face in her hands, wept as though her heart would break.

Eunice felt terribly frightened—something dreadful must have happened. Lilian was so brave and self-contained; she so rarely gave way. Her own face grew white as she sat down beside her, and she could find no voice to question her; but the next moment Lilian regained her self-command.

"There, I will be good and not cry any more!" she exclaimed, drying her eyes. "Oh, how selfish I am to be troubling you like this, and you look so frightened, poor dear! There is nothing really the matter, Eunice—nothing bad, I mean—only I have been a little upset. You know what Douglas is to me; as long as he is happy it never seems to matter what becomes of me. I do believe I live more in his life than in my own."

"Yes—yes, I know." Eunice felt as though she could scarcely breathe. It was about Douglas, then.

"If I could be sure that he had not made a mistake," went on Lilian thoughtfully; "but I have not told you yet, Eunice." But Lilian did not look at her friend as she spoke. "Last night when Douglas came from Chez-Nous he told me things were definitely settled, that he

and Araby at last understood each other, and that they were engaged. I am to go over there and see her this afternoon."

Eunice wondered afterwards how she could have listened to this without any painful sensation. Her feelings seemed numbed, she was not even surprised. "Of course I have expected it," she said to herself; but she was wrong, nothing was farther from her thoughts.

"Have they cared for each other long?" she asked in a dull voice, which rang rather flatly on Lilian's ear.

"I don't know," she returned sadly. "Douglas was not communicative, and said very little. He has always admired her, and they have been much together, and Araby is very fond of him."

"Indeed!" Eunice's throat was so dry that she could not get another word out.

"You must have seen that," went on Lilian. She was speaking more naturally now, as though it were a relief to unburden herself. "But she has not always been good to him; she was captious and exacting. I know for certain, Eunice, that he asked her to marry him six months ago, and she refused him because she said he did not care enough for her."

"Perhaps he did not." Eunice never knew why she said this. Lilian gave a little start, and her face grew troubled.

"How can one tell?" she returned anxiously. "Douglas is very reserved, he only told me the bare fact; but he certainly looked unhappy. As for Araby, she did not seem like the same girl; if she punished him she certainly punished herself more; but all the same, I knew he would one day ask her again."

"And you are sorry?"

"I have not said so," very quickly. Lilian was too truthful to contradict Eunice's words. "I am very fond of Araby; she has always interested me; but she has puzzled me too. But I will own to you, Eunice, because we are such friends and you are so dear and good to

me, that at times I have had my doubts whether Araby is the woman to make him happy."

Eunice was silent—she had no possible answer to give to this; and she was beginning to be conscious of a faint, dull, aching pain, to which she could give no name.

"Araby is too emotional, she will try his patience; and then she is so delicate," continued Lilian. "The mistress of Monkbarn ought to be a strong woman. They are very unlike. Araby is intellectual and lives in a world of her own, and Douglas is practical and rather prosaic. But there, I am wrong to be talking to you like this. If Araby comes here I mean to love her as though she were my own sister."

"Dear Lilian, you are so good!" and Eunice's cold lips touched her cheek; then with a sudden impulse Lilian laid her head on her friend's shoulder; but she shed no more tears.

"If it be a mistake I trust he will never find it out," she said very seriously; "for he means to marry her as soon as possible. Douglas is never one for shilly-shallying, and he hates the idea of a long engagement. Oh, with all her caprices Araby will find her master in him. He is very tender-hearted and chivalrous, but he is not weak, and he is never afraid of telling her frankly when he thinks her wrong. Oh, it will be all right, Eunice," trying to speak cheerfully; "his influence is too strong, and Araby loves him too well, for anything to be really wrong between them; we shall all be as happy as possible," and here Lilian smiled faintly. "And you must try to forget that you found me crying, Eunice, for it was weak and babyish of me to be fretting because the dear old life was over, and that I could not keep my darling boy to myself any more. But I am going to be so good," and Lilian rose as she spoke, and set about clearing up her work and putting the room straight. Eunice would have taken her leave after this, but Lilian would not hear of it; they would have luncheon, and

bicycle back together. Lilian was to spend the afternoon and evening at Chez-Nous. Araby had sent her a very pressing message by Douglas.

It was impossible for Eunice to excuse herself under the circumstances, so she was obliged to remain; but she was thankful when Lilian apologised for leaving her alone for half an hour. "I must bathe my eyes and make myself look respectable," she said with a forlorn attempt at her old merry laugh. "You can amuse yourself with those papers and magazines," and Eunice nodded. But as the door closed the magazine dropped from her hand, and Eunice's eyes gazed blankly at the old fishpond.

"I suppose it is true," she said to herself. "I shall believe it presently;" but as she looked down at the steely-blue water, curious half-forgotten snatches of conversation came into her mind.

What was that Miss Jem had said that day when they were talking about unmarried women being lonely?

"Don't I know what it is to be young?" Jem had said in her quaint way; "it is just fairyland; and if you come to a closed door you never open it without thinking that something pleasant may happen, and that Mr. Right may be round the corner, and if it be Mr. Wrong—well, it can't be helped."

"And if it be Mr. Wrong?" and here Eunice's face contracted with pain, and with a sudden restlessness she got up and wandered into the Friars' Hall.

A fire was burning somewhat dimly, a half-burnt log spluttered and smouldered on the hearth. Eunice sat down on the high-backed settle, and looked round her drearily; then a sudden scorching flush came to her face.

"It must have been my fancy," she whispered. "He meant nothing—nothing at all; it was just a foolish mistake." And then as Lilian appeared in the corridor she got up from her seat.

Both the girls made rather a poor attempt at eating their luncheon; but though they kept up a desultory

conversation for Rhoda's benefit, neither of them could remember afterwards what they had said.

Eunice was thankful when they mounted their bicycles, and were speeding down the country roads with the cold fresh air blowing on their faces. During the long ride they scarcely exchanged half-a-dozen words; only when Lilian jumped off her machine at the gate of Chez-Nous she put up her face to Eunice.

"You have done me good," she said gratefully. "I can go through it all better now." And then, as she was about to wheel her bicycle in at the open gate, Eunice recalled her.

"Lilian!" It was growing dark, and Eunice's face was half hidden under her hat. "I forgot to give you a message; please give my love to Miss Pater, and—and—my kind congratulations to her and your brother."

"Thank you, dear; yes, I will tell them." Eunice had schooled herself to say the words, and there was nothing in her voice to betray her; nevertheless, Lilian sighed a little heavily as she walked up the long drive. "If it had been Eunice," she said to herself; "if—if——" and then she broke off as though ashamed of her thought.

Eunice felt somewhat relieved when Rachel told her that Miss Jem had not returned from Chez-Nous. She was thankful not only for the reprieve, but also because there would be no need for her to say anything.

As the bedroom fires were never lighted until five, and her room felt cold, she went down to the drawing-room. She had begged Rachel not to light the lamps or bring the tea until she rang. "I am tired, and should like to rest a little," she had said quietly. It was the truth, she was tired; but, all the same, rest was impossible to her.

She knew now that she had been hurt in a vital part, though for the time a merciful numbness and insensibility had prevented her from realising the extent of her injury; but now the dull throbbing of pain warned her of her danger. She must summon up all her self-command and strength of will, no one must guess that she had anything

to hide. Her maidenly pride, her sense of propriety, would help her to crush the baleful feelings. "If I have made one mistake, I will not make another," she said to herself proudly.

Eunice was a thoroughly healthy-minded girl. She acknowledged to herself frankly that a misfortune had overtaken her, but she did not morbidly exaggerate it as some girls would have done, or torture herself with trying to find out the whys and the wherefores, or to impute blame unnecessarily.

"If I have been a fool, I must pay the penalty of my folly," she said with some degree of bitterness; but she never doubted for a moment that she had been a fool!

He had been so kind, so kind, and somehow it had seemed to her as though he cared; there had been looks, tones, words, unguarded moments when she had really had some reason for her surmise; but of course now she knew she had been wrong. It was her ignorance of the world, of young men's natures, that had led to her mistake. He had meant nothing but simple kindness to his sister's friend; before she had seen him he had asked Araby to marry him, and was intending to ask her again. And here Eunice called herself a fool for the second time.

Certainly she did not spare herself, but the discipline was salutary. Some wounds heal better for being cauterised, though perhaps all women have not courage to apply the cautery.

"I shall get over it in time," she said to herself later on in the gloaming, "every one does; besides, when it is only one's fancy,"—ah, here lay the sting. If there had been any real foundation for that secret hope of hers she could have borne it more cheerfully, but to suffer for one's own foolish mistake was as humiliating as it was unpleasant.

"There is only one thing to do," she went on,—"to live my daily life so that no one shall ever find out how foolish I have been. Even Lilian does not guess, though she saw it all; but then of course she understood him."

But Eunice was wrong. Lilian, who was very clear-sighted where any one dear to her was concerned, knew far more than Eunice suspected, though she would rather have died than own it.

There were other perplexed thoughts pressing on the girl's mind as she sat in the soft warmth of the twilight. Lilian's unhappiness, her doubt of her brother's wisdom, her fear lest Araby should not make him the wife he needed, their diversity of tastes and interests, were all oppressing her, and every moment her sense of heaviness increased.

"He was so good, of all men he deserved to be happy. If Araby disappointed him——" but here Eunice started up and rang for the lights and tea. Miss Jem would be coming back, and it would never do for her to find her sitting in the dark doing nothing.

Eunice was wise in putting her good resolutions in force at once, and not indulging herself in questionable and unprofitable cogitations.

"I shall have enough trouble to keep myself in order," thought the girl humbly as she knelt down on the rug to kindle a blaze, "without trying to put other people to rights; one could not be strong enough without help." But happily Eunice knew where to seek it.

And so it was that Miss Jem, entering shortly afterwards, found a cheerful, well-lighted room, and Eunice tranquilly finishing her tea.

Jem, who looked tired and rather worried, glanced round her with satisfaction.

"Lor', you do look comfortable, dear," she said in a tone of enjoyment. "There is nothing like home after all. You were silly, though, to have waited tea for me, for it is nearly six o'clock, but I may as well have a cup to keep you company." And Jem threw off her sealskin and furs in her free-and-easy fashion, and sat down to bask in the pleasant warmth, while Eunice waited on her silently.

CHAPTER XXIV

"A STORMY PETREL MAY BE A NICE BIRD"

Enjoy the spring of love and youth,
To some good angel leave the rest;
For Time will teach thee soon the truth,
There are no birds in last year's nest!
—LONGFELLOW.

JEM stared into the fire rather absently for a few minutes, while she stirred her tea. Eunice, who could now read her face like a book, was sure that her visit to Chez-Nous had not wholly pleased her.

"I am afraid you are tired," she began, hardly knowing what to say. Then Jem roused herself.

"Oh, I have had nothing to tire me," she returned rather shortly; "but I am a bit bothered, I confess. Well," turning round so sharply that Eunice quite jumped, "I suppose Lilian's news rather startled you?"

"I did not expect it, certainly," replied the girl truthfully. "Were you very much surprised, Miss Jem?"

"I can't say I was. I knew too much for that," returned Jem, evidently settling down for a comfortable talk. "I was sure something was up when Araby rushed off to Brighton in that sudden, harum-scarum way. It was as plain as possible that she and Douglas were not hitting it off. Either he had cooled a bit, or she had got a jealous notion in her head. She is as full of fancies as an egg is of meat; anyhow, she was leading him a life, but of course my young lady knew that he would go after her and bring her back."

"I thought he went to London?" faltered Eunice.

"Well, so he did," returned Miss Jem. "I daresay he had some business of his own, but it does not take

more than an hour to get to Brighton from Victoria. Anyhow, he did it, and they had it out; but would you believe it, though she had not seen him for nearly six weeks, she received him as coolly as possible, and tried to make him believe that she was not pleased to see him."

"Wasn't that rather foolish of her?"

"Well, you needn't reckon for good sense where Araby's concerned," observed Miss Jem contemptuously, "for when she is in some moods she is as skittish as a colt; but it was no use her trying to hoodwink Douglas, for he could see she was just play-acting. He had his say, and spoke to her pretty plainly, for he was sick of her nonsense; but it is one thing to take a horse to the water—if he is not in the right humour you cannot make him drink; and Araby was as provoking as possible and would not give him a straightforward answer. Am I tiring you with my talk, Eunice?"

"Oh, no, no. I—I like to hear it all," observed the girl faintly. The fire was hot, and she had drawn back into the shadows, and held a large Japanese screen before her face.

"Well, he let her be for a day or two," went on Jem, "and yesterday he went up to Chez-Nous determined that he would bring her to book. 'You may take me or leave me, for after to-night I will never ask you to marry me again'—that was what he said, and as she knew he would keep his word she was forced to say yes."

"You know, of course, Miss Jem, that he had asked her before."

"Oh, did Lilian tell you that?" in a surprised tone. "A pretty piece of work Araby did then. Why, she was as much in love with him as she is now, and that is saying a good deal; yet because he did not come up to her notion of a lover, she just sent him about his business. I know Mrs. Tina gave her a good scolding. 'You have treated him shamefully, Arab, and it will only serve you right if he never asks you to change your mind'—that is what she told her, and the Captain was just as hard on her."

"It seems very strange." Eunice spoke in a bewildered voice. "How could any one who cared for him behave so? Are you sure that she knows her own mind now?" Then Jem nodded convincingly.

"There is not a doubt of it; if ever a girl is heart-satisfied and brimming over with happiness, that girl is Araby. Why, she is a changed creature; it was 'Dear Miss Jem,' and 'Dear Lilian,' as though her mouth was lined with butter and honey. But, Eunice, I don't think Lilian is over-pleased with the engagement; when she came into the room I could have declared she had been crying; but for all that, nothing could be prettier than her behaviour to Araby."

"It is rather hard for Lilian; you see, she has had her brother all to herself."

"Don't I know that," and Jem repressed a sigh, "and how she fairly worships him? I think I never saw a brother and sister so devoted to each other. Lilian is a little trump, and she always makes the best of everything, but if she could have chosen a wife for Douglas she would never have fixed on Araby, I am sure of that."

"Perhaps not."

"No, indeed, she knows her too well, and so do I for the matter of that. A seagull or a stormy petrel may be a nice bird, but it would not be a comfortable inmate of a house. Araby is attractive to most people, though I think her rather washed-out myself, and she is clever and affectionate, and has plenty of good in her; but she has not got the making of a farmer's wife."

"Lilian told me that she was not strong."

"Strong!" and Jem's voice was quite indignant. "In my opinion they ought not to allow her to marry him; her health is not what it should be, and Douglas will find himself saddled with an expensive, sickly wife. To be sure, he can fall back on Lilian; but my word, when Araby comes as mistress to Monkbarn, Lilian will have to mind what she is about. Oh, Douglas will have plenty of watery Sabbaths, as they say in Scotland, when he

marries his lady-love." And with this cheerful remark, Miss Jem dragged herself unwillingly from her easy-chair and announced her intention of going to see Billy.

Eunice felt as though the evening would never end. Jem, who could think or talk of nothing else but the engagement, was continually breaking in with something fresh, and Eunice, who had taken up a book in self-defence, could only put it down again.

"Araby had got her diamond ring," she observed once; "she showed it to me before I had been ten minutes in the room. It is an heirloom, and Douglas's mother and grandmother, and I believe his great-grandmother too, wore it as their engagement ring; the diamonds are small, but they are set thickly, and you can almost see them flash across the room. Araby has a pretty hand, as I told her."

And again: "Douglas was a bit quiet, but in my opinion he behaved very well. I don't believe," continued Jem shrewdly, "that men like being engaged half as much as women do, though they are willing enough to be married. I said something like this to Douglas, but he only laughed, and said I was a witch. 'For those are the words of wisdom, Miss Jem,' he went on; 'and if my liege lady would only consent to be guided by me we should go and get married early one morning while our neighbours were asleep, and we should be off, like the Prince and Princess in the fairy story, while they were still yawning and rubbing their eyes.'"

"Did Miss Pater agree to this?"

"Oh, she only shook her head at him and blushed, but I could see she was pleased too; everything he said and did was just perfect, you may be sure of that. Oh, by the bye, Eunice, they are all coming to dine here on Thursday, and Lilian is coming too; and as it is rather a grand occasion, you must hurry Miss Evans with your new dress."

For the evening dress had been selected and was now in the dressmaker's hands. Eunice, who had been guided

by Lilian's taste, had chosen a soft, serviceable blue silk, though afterwards she had been stricken with shame at her own extravagance. Some new boots had made the hole in her purse larger, and after her dressmaker had been paid, only a few shillings would remain of her quarter's salary; but Miss Jem only laughed when she heard this.

"Why, your purse will be full again at Ladyday," she said; "and as to that, you can draw on me in advance if you like." But as Eunice repudiated this idea with horror, she continued: "The long and short of it is, you want the dress badly, and if you had not got it I should have bought it for you myself. I like you to be nicely dressed, so you will please regard that as one of your duties," and Jem's manner was a little peremptory. "There is a black velveteen that I have been dying to give you; it is as good as new, and was made at Marshall and Snelgrove's, but it does not suit me, I look so thick and podgy in it; now, why shouldn't Miss Evans alter it to fit you while she is making the blue silk?" and after a little more talk and judicious coaxing Jem had had her way, and both the dresses were in the dressmaker's hand. That night, when she went up to bed, Eunice resolved that the black velveteen should be worn on Thursday evening. "The blue silk will be too smart. I shall tell Miss Jem that I would rather wear it first at Miss Prescott's party," for the Archdeacon and his daughter always gathered their friends and neighbours round them on a certain date in January, for what Mrs. Pater termed a "mixed salad entertainment," with plenty of vinegar and not too much oil; by which she meant that there was always a large infusion of the elderly spinster element, and only a sprinkling of young curates. Nevertheless, it was always considered a very smart affair in Disborough, and the Archdeacon's party was the prevailing topic among the ladies.

Eunice was sensible enough to know that though her own little bit of machinery was out of gear, the rest of

the world's mechanism would go on as usual; and that though something of the joyousness of life had faded out of it, she must still eat and drink and sleep and do her duty, for in no other way could she keep her secret and her self-esteem into the bargain.

"I suppose one can get used to anything," she would say to herself a little dreamily; and when she woke in the cold wintry dawn, and a sudden recollection made her shiver, she always repeated the same words—"It has to be faced, and it is no good being a coward; it is all in the day's work;" and somehow this simple little formula seemed to brace her. And if she suffered, and now and then her courage failed, and some bitter tears of humiliation and disappointment were shed, no one but her guardian angel was the wiser, and perhaps in those pure, pitying eyes such tears were purgative and purifying and distilled their own healing balm. Nevertheless, Eunice never cared to recall those days.

The thought of Miss Jem's dinner-party was dreadful to her, but she saw Douglas Hilton before Thursday.

On Monday she went into the town to pay a bill for Miss Jem, and as she was passing the Minster she saw him walking up the wide-paved path, attended by his faithful Nigger. It was impossible to escape recognition, they had both seen her; Nigger wagged his tail and bounded towards her, and Douglas quickened his steps.

"It has to be faced"—actually those words were on her lips as they shook hands. If Eunice had not been so engaged with her own uneasy feelings she would have seen how exceedingly nervous Douglas was; for the moment he seemed tongue-tied. It was Eunice who began to talk a little breathlessly.

"I suppose you have been calling at Bright Holm to ask after the Archdeacon? he was so much better yesterday, he actually preached in the morning."

"So Miss Prescott told us," returned Douglas gravely. "I left Lilian there, as they had some business to discuss; I shall go back and fetch her in half-an-hour. I sup-

pose," looking absently at the little grey-gloved hand that was caressing Nigger's rough coat, "that you are doing some business in the town for Miss Jem?"

"Yes, but I am not going far, only to Williams' in Holly Street; good-bye,—will you give my love to Lilian?" And Eunice was turning hurriedly away when, to her dismay, Douglas placed himself at her side, and gave Nigger his stick to carry, in just his old way.

Eunice's face grew hot; she never dreamt that he would escort her. "Oh, please do not trouble to come," she stammered; but he quietly assured her that he had nothing else to do. Douglas had no idea that he was embarrassing the girl, and that she would have gladly dispensed with his attentions. He saw no reason why he should alter his behaviour to his sister's friend; when he had met her he had always turned back with her, for the pleasure of her society. He liked talking to her; she was more simple and natural than other girls, and there was nothing complex about her, nothing of the stormy-petrel nature to make him sit up and marvel at her.

Eunice fixed her eyes on Nigger's great black waving tail, as he walked in the centre of the road balancing his master's heavy stick, and not caring a jot for an excitable little fox-terrier who was barking and snapping at his heels. She was trying painfully to keep up a one-sided conversation, never noticing how very little help her companion gave her. She was telling him about Billy. She chose Billy as a nice safe subject.

"He comes downstairs now, and is so much stronger. Miss Jem and he are always together; I do not know what she will do when Billy goes home."

"She might adopt him," for Eunice had stopped here, and was evidently waiting for an answer.

"Oh, there is his father to consider," returned Eunice, wondering why she felt so suddenly tired. "I don't believe Miss Jem would think it right to deprive him of his child. Billy is far happier with us than he is at Honey Hanger. Mr. Desmond is fond of him, but he

does not understand children; and he says cutting, severe things that frighten Billy. I think children mind sarcasm more than grown-up people."

There is nothing like pluck. Eunice was getting on famously. As she finished her long speech she even ventured to glance at Douglas, he was so silent. Perhaps her conversation bored him; he was probably not interested about Billy.

Perhaps not; for at this moment Douglas remembered that he would be late, and took himself off rather abruptly. "We shall meet again on Thursday, so good-bye until then," he said, touching his hat, but he did not again shake hands.

Had Billy really bored him? or was there something in the tired young face and soft, pathetic eyes that warned Douglas that he had stayed long enough? When Nigger still went trotting on in his ridiculous self-important way, Douglas called to him quite angrily, and took away his stick. "We are a couple of fools, Nigger," he said half aloud; "but we must be careful, old fellow," and Nigger wagged his tail, and walked along soberly, as though in sympathy with his master's mood.

Eunice felt perplexed at Douglas Hilton's sudden departure. She had done her own part so bravely, there had been no awkward pauses; but he had not been like himself at all. He had been so grave and silent; nothing had seemed to interest him. Why had he walked with her if he had not wished to talk? perhaps it was her fault. She ought to have congratulated him, and spoken of Araby; but she had sent her message through Lilian.

These doubts and conjectures were harassing her like a swarm of gnats, and it was not until she had walked a mile beyond her proper destination that she pulled herself together. "It is no use," she said to herself dejectedly; "of course he is different, and so am I, and no amount of thinking will alter it." And she did her business, and hurried home; and if she had been five minutes later she would have been overtaken by Douglas

and Lilian on their way to Chez-Nous. Eunice only mentioned casually in the course of luncheon that she had met Mr. Hilton, but Jem was too full of other affairs to pay much heed.

Mr. Desmond had returned, and had paid a long visit to the Dene. He had been delighted with the improvement in Billy. "The child seemed quite pleased to see him. Do you know, Eunice," she went on, "if it had not been a family party, and a special occasion, I would have asked Mr. Desmond to dine here on Thursday."

"Oh, that would never do," in an alarmed voice. "I don't think the Paters want to know him."

But Jem turned a little pettish at this. "Well, I can't help that; if I give a party I shall invite my own guests without asking Mrs. Tina's advice. It is Douglas I am thinking about. He is a bit stiff and stand-offish if he is not comfortable, so we had best leave it as it is. But there is one thing that vexes me: if we had waited another day or so we could have had the Major. Araby tells me he is coming on Friday."

"Major Ford! oh yes, I remember."

"He is a nice, sociable little fellow," went on Jem, "and we are very good friends. I will tell you what we will do, Eunice. I will ask the Major to dinner some evening, and we will get Mr. Desmond to meet him. We will be just by ourselves. It is no use thinking of Douglas, for he will be dancing attendance on his lady-love, though Lilian always has a good word for the Major; but four is a cosy number." And as Eunice could offer no reasonable objection to this, Miss Jem went off in high good-humour, leaving Eunice to wonder why everything seemed so flat and unprofitable, and so altogether lacking in enjoyment. "I suppose Longfellow was right," she said to herself, "some days must be dark and dreary;" and then as she looked out on the black sodden grass of the lawn, and the bare branches of the trees, she shivered slightly. On the forked branch of one of the tallest trees she could see the remnant of

an old nest left from last year; a wood-pigeon and his mate had built there; Jem had told her. Now the warm, softly lined nest was a forlorn and tattered object. The creeping mists, the ruined nest, only added to her melancholy, but she would not give way. She took up her book, and fixed herself a task. "I will read so many pages," she said doggedly, and she kept her word.

CHAPTER XXV

"IT IS ALL IN THE DAY'S WORK"

All her thoughts
Grew loving. She would fain the world had waxed
More happy with her happiness.

—JEAN INGELOW.

Ah! if you knew what peace there is in an accepted sorrow!

—MADAME GUYON.

THURSDAY was a trying day to Eunice.

In the first place Miss Jem had one of her periodical attacks of fussiness, and worried herself and everybody else in the house. At a very early stage of the proceedings Mrs. Compton turned restive. "Now you had best be leaving things to me and Susan," she said tartly, "for neither of us are babes in arms, and it isn't the first time I have cooked a dinner and given satisfaction; you just sit yourself down, Miss Jem, and rest a bit, or you will worrit us into fiddlestrings."

This was plain speaking; and Jem, who knew her factotum had feelings with which she dared not trifle, took herself off, and went to harass Rachel's march. Rachel, who had lived fourteen years at the Dene and had found them years of solid comfort, submitted patiently enough at first to her mistress's orders and counter-orders; but when Jem commenced to rearrange the table decorations, Rachel began to look glum, though she said nothing.

"Well, why don't you go on?" asked Jem a little crossly, as she disarranged a trail of smilax which Rachel's clever fingers had festooned so prettily.

"I am only waiting until you have finished spoiling my work, ma'am," returned Rachel, so sourly that Jem looked quite frightened. "Well, you are touchy," she

said, "there is no speaking to any of you to-day. I only thought it looked a little stiff and formal, but as you won't be interfered with——" and Jem tossed her head and looked affronted; but after that she left the table alone, and Rachel, with pursed-up lips, carefully replaced the smilax and effaced all traces of her mistress's handiwork.

Jem was the idol of the household, but an idol must occasionally be kept in its niche. "When missis takes rampaging about like a bull in a china-shop," remarked Rachel later on to Mrs. Compton, "there is nothing for it but to get rid of her."

There was not much peace for Jem in the morning-room; for Billy, who had been thoroughly spoilt since his illness, was very fractious at finding himself no longer the first object, and had flown into a childish rage with Eunice, and had knocked down her card castle very rudely.

"Don't want stupid cards. I want my Jem." And at this inauspicious moment Jem entered, looking flushed and tired.

"Oh, Billy, you don't mean to say you are cross, too," she said plaintively, as the little fellow climbed up on her lap and put his arms round her neck. And actually there were tears in Jem's eyes.

"Billy is a good, good boy now," returned the child, relapsing for once into his baby ways, "and loves my Jemmy."

"I daresay Billy is sorry that he has been a rude little boy," returned Eunice in a forgiving tone, "so we won't say any more about it. Dear Miss Jem, you do look tired. Please go and lie down until tea-time, and I will stay with Billy." But the spoilt child would not hear of this. "Don't want girls. I want my Jemmy," he replied querulously, and tightening his hold so that Jem was nearly strangled.

"Oh, I will stop here by the fire," she said meekly, "and Billy will be quiet, because my head aches. If

you could hurry the tea a bit, Eunice, for I daren't say another word to Rachel, she is in such a temper." But Eunice, who got on excellently with all the household, was not the least afraid of making her request. "Oh, how beautiful it all looks! What taste you have, Rachel!" she had exclaimed quite involuntarily as she entered the dining-room. And after that Rachel would have done anything.

Jem gave a little weary sigh of satisfaction when Rachel brought in the tea-tray. She had not quite recovered herself; and her mistress's meek little speech, "Oh, thank you, Rachel, you have been nice and quick, and I have such a bad head," met with no response. "Of course people could not fuss and worry for hours without having a headache," thought Rachel as she closed the door.

Eunice did her best to cheer Miss Jem's drooping spirits, and she succeeded so well that the headache quite disappeared before it was time to dress for the evening.

"My word, you do look nice!" said Jem when Eunice made her appearance in the drawing-room. "If only that gown would have suited me half as well I would never have parted with it." And she was right. Eunice had never looked to greater advantage. The black velveteen set off the supple girlish figure. To be sure, Miss Jem looked a little contemptuously at the silver locket, attached to a narrow ribbon, which was Eunice's sole ornament. "That rubbishy thing," she said to herself, but, in truth, the round white throat needed no other adornment. "I am glad you like it," returned Eunice hurriedly. She looked a little paler than usual, but there was no time to say more, for that moment Douglas Hilton entered the room with his sister, and the next minute they could hear the Paters' carriage in the drive.

Eunice, who was in the back drawing-room with Lilian, caught her breath as Araby glided into the room. Never did she forget how the girl looked that night: the virginal purity and grace that seemed to stamp her whole appear-

ance! The cluster of snowdrops that she wore on her breast seemed a fitting emblem of her simplicity and whiteness. Even the slight maidenly droop of the golden head, as Araby met her lover's eyes, was flowerlike in its graceful modesty. There was something so fair and spiritualised in her whole aspect that Eunice did not wonder when Lilian whispered, "How lovely Araby looks to-night!" It was no stormy petrel that evening. Araby's voice, as she addressed Eunice, had the soft, cooing note of a dove who had found her mate.

"Miss Cleveland, I want to thank you for your kind message; dear Lilian gave it to me. May I sit down beside you a moment?" Here the brilliant hazel eyes looked at her very sweetly. "I hope we shall be great friends. I want all Lilian's friends to be mine too."

"You are very good," responded Eunice rather nervously.

"Lilian has always been like a sister to me, and yet no two girls could be more unlike," continued Araby smiling. And then a wild-rose flush came to her face as Douglas's tall figure appeared between the curtains.

"I am to take you in to dinner, Araby," he said simply, and then he paused involuntarily. "You have not done it on purpose, I suppose, but you and Miss Cleveland look like night and morning personified." Then Lilian, who was beside him, burst into one of her merry laughs.

"Douglas is trying hard to pay a compliment, but he shows his 'prentice hand. The contrast is certainly rather striking."

"Araby, you will be obliged to go with Douglas, for Mrs. Pater insists she will have nothing to do with him. She has walked off with Miss Jem and the Captain."

"Come, they will be waiting for us," remarked Douglas. And as he offered his arm he looked admiringly at his betrothed. He would have been hard indeed to satisfy if that fragile and delicate beauty had not appealed strongly to him that night. Nevertheless, his manner was still a little grave and quiet.

Never had any dinner-party at the Dene been more successful. The household had forgotten their grievances, and were only anxious to do themselves and their mistress credit. Mrs. Pater, who was on her best behaviour, praised everything without stint or limit. "I do envy you Mrs. Compton," she observed, as she helped herself to an *entrée*. "She must be a perfect treasure."

"Lor', my dear, how you talk!" returned Miss Jem, bridling with pleasure. "And I am sure you have no cause to envy any one, for Anderson is a first-rate cook."

"Oh, she does very well," replied Mrs. Pater, "but she has her faults. A cook with moods is apt to be a little free with her pepper sometimes. Were you speaking to me, Ian?" For it was evident that Captain Pater wished to introduce another topic. Mrs. Pater had lived so long in India that she had forgotten English ears were quick, and English tongues quick also. She had a dangerous habit of talking out her thoughts at inauspicious moments.

Araby sat between Douglas and Lilian and talked to them in rather a low voice; but when dinner was over she put her arm through Eunice's, and presently the three girls were established cosily on the big Chesterfield couch, out of range of Miss Jem's and Mrs. Pater's voices.

"Miss Cleveland," began Araby in her soft, flute-like tone, "I want you to be nice to me—really nice, I mean. You have known me nearly as long as you have Lilian, but you are never stiff with her."

"No, of course not." But Eunice looked a little perplexed.

"What did I tell you before dinner?" rather reproachfully. "That Lilian's friends must be mine too. Please don't be cold and stand-offish any more. Why don't you call me by my Christian name? It would make me feel as though you cared for me a little, though, of course, not as you care for Lilian. We should be so much more comfortable."

"You are very kind. I will try." Eunice spoke with effort. Araby's manner was so winning, she was so evidently in earnest, that it was impossible not to respond. Lilian, who was on the other side of Araby, smiled across at her.

"You will soon find that it will come naturally, Eunice," she said brightly. "Araby is a very unconventional person when she likes people, and she has taken a fancy to you from the first. You are a popular person in Shepperton. Have you ever discovered that?" And then they chatted on in girlish fashion until the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room, Eunice taking her part bravely in the conversation. Douglas did not at once join them, but as he talked to Mrs. Pater his attention wandered so obviously that now and then he forgot to answer her.

"Aren't we going to have some music, Eunice?" observed Miss Jem briskly. And this broke up the little group. Lilian had a slight cold and hoarseness, so the duets were laid aside, and Araby sang song after song alone. Douglas stood beside her and turned over her pages. Eunice had half hidden herself in a low chair on the other side of the grand piano. Never had Araby sung as she did that night. As Eunice listened to the clear, birdlike notes that rang through the room, she thought of a lark rising from its nest in the cornfield and trying to soar to heaven's gate. Eunice wondered why that blissful young voice brought a mist to her eyes.

She was so near that she could hear Douglas say in a low voice as Araby at last rose from her seat, "Thank you, dear. You have surpassed yourself this evening. I have never heard you sing like that before."

"No, perhaps not," returned the girl gently. "I think I was inspired to-night." And Araby threw back her queenly head and looked smilingly at her lover. That fond, happy look was unseen by any one but him. Douglas's face was a little flushed as he rejoined the others.

"Well, I do think it has been a success," observed Jem triumphantly when her guests had gone, "and I never enjoyed an evening more. I never knew Mrs. Pater so civil, Eunice. She praised everything up to the skies, and I must say the dinner was beautiful. Araby looked downright handsome, and as for her singing, why, the Captain and me agreed that it might have been a nestful of linnets. I never admired Araby before as I did to-night; but Douglas was a bit grave, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. Mr. Hilton is often grave."

"Well, he was not grave on Christmas Day, I know that. He was full of his nonsense then. Dear me! the Major will be coming to Chez-Nous to-morrow, and Mrs. Pater has promised to bring him round one evening. I thought she looked a little mischievous when she said that. Now I must go and have a word with Mrs. Compton, and then we will be getting to bed. What's that you are saying, Eunice?"

But the girl only laughed and shook her head. Had she really spoken aloud?

When Miss Jem had bustled out of the room to make the *amende honorable* to her long-suffering household, Eunice gave herself a weary little stretch and repeated the words:

"It is all in the day's work. What does it matter if I am tired? It is all in the day's work."

Eunice was not specially interested in Major Ford's arrival, though Miss Jem alluded to it more than once.

"I wonder if the Major will drop in this evening," she would say; but five evenings passed before the expected visit was paid. Eunice was alone when they were announced. Jem had gone upstairs to see Billy, who had taken a slight cold and was fractious in consequence.

"Are you all alone in the gloaming, Miss Cleveland?" exclaimed Mrs. Pater, rustling in in her silks and furs. "What a magnificent fire! I have brought my brother, Major Ford, to see you. Cecil, this is Miss Cleveland."

Eunice extended her hand with a friendly smile. To

Mrs. Tina's secret mortification, there was no surprised look in her face as the dapper little Major came into view. Miss Jem's graphic description had fully prepared her. Major Ford was a very small man. He was not much taller than his sister, though his figure was neat and soldierly. But, in spite of his sleepy eyes, sandy moustache, and bristling scrubbing-brush of a head, she liked his face. He certainly looked what Miss Jem had called him—"an honest, good-tempered little fellow."

"Well, Miss Cleveland, we aren't much like brother and sister, are we?" observed Mrs. Pater, trying to conceal her disappointment, for she loved to play her practical jokes. But Eunice was not to be drawn.

"I think there is a likeness," she said, looking from one to the other. "Perhaps it is not so much in features as in expression."

"There, I always told you so, Floris," returned her brother exultingly. He always called her Floris, however much she objected to it. "People must put up with their Christian names," he would say, "and Floris is just the sort of fly-away, flibbertigibbet sort of name to suit you. Tina! What rot! You ain't a Sunday-school good little girl. Ian is an old humbug; he can do as he likes; but Floris for me!"

At this moment Jem made her appearance, and there was a cordial greeting between her and her old friend.

"Well, now, if you ain't a sight for sore eyes, Major," exclaimed Jem, who was evidently delighted to welcome her favourite. Then the Major put his heels together and bowed low.

"My word, Miss Jem," he said quite seriously, "I never saw you looking in better form—years younger. It makes me feel an old fellow to look at you. But forty years knocking about in the wilderness takes it out of a man." And here he pulled at his moustache and glanced sleepily at Eunice.

"There is no need for you to tell every one your age, Cecil," returned his sister reprovingly. "If you are a

ridiculous old bachelor it is no one's fault but your own. But if you will flirt with every nice girl you meet——"

"Hush!" interposed Major Ford. "Please don't take my character away. Miss Cleveland looks quite shocked. I appeal to my old friend. Ain't I a decent sort of chap, Miss Jem? Honour bright, you know. Speak the truth and shame the devil!"

Then Miss Jem, with the utmost warmth, rushed to his defence.

"Don't you believe Mrs. Pater, Eunice. The Major isn't a flirt, though, like other men, he is fond of talking to the ladies; why, he makes himself pleasant to all the old dowdy ones in the most good-natured way. You come to me, Major, and I will always take your part," continued Jem in her warm-hearted manner.

She and the Major were old allies, and there were few people whom he respected more than Miss Durnford. Indeed, more than once it had crossed his mind that if Miss Jem had been a little prettier and a little more refined he might have done a worse thing than ask her to marry him. He had thought the same with regard to a score of other women, but had always cooled off at the last. Perhaps Major Ford was fastidious, or he dearly prized his liberty, but the fact remained that he was forty, and still a bachelor.

Before the visit was ended Jem had fixed an evening for the Major to dine at the Dene, and the invitation had been accepted with evident pleasure.

"We will get another gentleman to meet you," Jem had remarked casually, and so it was settled.

"You never told them it was Mr. Desmond he was to meet," observed Eunice when they had gone. The omission of the name had surprised her.

"Oh, it would only have set Mrs. Tina's tongue wagging," replied Jem hurriedly. "She never has a civil word to say for Mr. Desmond. Besides, she was looking so curious, and it was none of her business to know whom I choose to invite. I really think the Shepperton folk

have taken a spite against the poor fellow, just because he is a little down on his luck. I call it real mean of them," continued Jem severely. "Douglas is the only one that has ever paid him the least attention. Not that Douglas cares for him, or Lilian either," finished Jem with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXVI

"THERE CANNOT BE TWO MISTRESSES"

We gather the honey of wisdom from thorns, not from flowers.

A deep insight into your own mind gives you a knowledge of other men's.—WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

THE day after Major Ford's visit Eunice was walking briskly down a lane near Brocklehurst when she saw Araby riding towards her, followed by a groom. She stopped at once to accost her.

"Well met!" she exclaimed gaily. "I was just going to leave a message at the Dene. Ian has gone to London for a night, and Tina and the Major are spending the afternoon at Shelgate, so I want you to come to tea, and, as an inducement, I will mention that Lilian will be with me."

"I shall be very pleased," returned Eunice; "but are you sure that I shall not be in the way? You and Lilian must have so much to discuss." For already there was talk of an early wedding.

"In the way? For shame, Eunice!" and Araby spoke with a sort of gentle peremptoriness. "Is that how you interpret our new code of friendship? Never mind, I forgive you for once; and, to set your mind at rest, I will inform you that Lilian is coming over to luncheon, and we shall have had quite enough of each other's society by tea-time." And then Araby flashed one of her brilliant smiles at her and cantered off.

Eunice watched her until she was out of sight. "How can any one wonder?" she asked herself. "How could he help admiring her?" And then she resumed her walk with a sigh. It was very cold and cheerless; the gleam

of wintry sunshine hardly penetrated to the lanes. The blackened hedgerows and empty pastures; the sodden red clay by the half-frozen pond, trodden by cattle hoofs; the general greyness and want of life, oppressed her. Even the cottage doors were shut, and only a few forlorn cocks and hens were pecking underneath the wood-piles in the hope of finding a stray crumb. The north wind heralded more snow. Eunice shivered slightly as she called to the dogs and set her face homewards.

Lilian's society was always an inducement. The friendship between them was deepening every day—none the less that Lilian was so careful not to obtrude it on Araby's notice. "We must not let her think that we say anything to each other that she may not know," she had said one day rather anxiously to Eunice. "Araby is very sensitive—a word will repel her—and I want, oh, I want to love her dearly for my boy's sake!" And Lilian spoke with all the earnestness of a good heart.

When Eunice reached Chez-Nous at the appointed hour, she found the two girls cosily established in the inner drawing-room; in the firelight it seemed a perfect nest of comfort, shut in with screens and curtains. It struck her that Lilian looked a trifle flushed, but she greeted Eunice as affectionately as ever, and nothing could be kinder than Araby's welcome. She wheeled up another easy-chair, put a glass screen between her and the fire, and then placed herself at the little tea-table.

"You have just come in time," she remarked, smiling. "Lil and I have been having such an argument. Have you any idea how obstinate Lilian can be when she gets an idea into her head?"

"Oh, could we see ourselves as others see us!" quoted Lilian lightly. "My dear old Arab, other people can be obstinate too. Shall I tell Eunice what has been the bone of contention?" and as Araby nodded, Lilian began willingly enough.

"You must know, Eunice, that my future sister-in-law is a most unpractical person. She forms theories and

expects to work them out in the most absurd way. Now, you are a sensible girl, and I am sure you will take my side. What do you suppose that Araby seriously suggests?—that when she and Douglas are married, she is only to be nominal mistress of the house, a sort of courtesy title, and that I am to retain my old position exactly as I do now."

"But there cannot be two mistresses in one house," returned Eunice, rather surprised at this.

"Exactly so! I knew you would agree with me; the idea is utterly ridiculous."

"It is nothing of the kind," interrupted Araby, with a touch of the old quick manner. "Eunice, listen to me a moment. There is method in my madness and a mine of wisdom in my suggestion. Do you think," drawing herself up to her full height, "that I have the proper cut for a farmer's wife?"

It might have been pure coquetry on Araby's part, but as she stood there in her girlish grace, with her small head poised so proudly, Eunice looked at her with unconcealed admiration. Never had she looked more charming. The dark-blue cloth dress fitted her like a habit, and relieved the somewhat colourless tint of her complexion, while the gleaming firelight made her fair hair shine like gold. As she stretched out her hand in that appeal to Eunice, the diamonds of her engagement ring flashed with wonderful light. Unconsciously her manner changed and softened as she glanced down on it.

"But if the farmer's wife be coming to Monkbarn," observed Lilian, with a tinge of seriousness in her manner; "what then, Arab?" Then Araby gave a petulant little shrug and seated herself again.

"Oh, I will not talk to you, Lil," she said impatiently. "I will address myself to Eunice; she is far too sensible to misunderstand me in the way you are doing. The whole thing is in a nutshell. What do I know about a dairy, or how much milk each Alderney is expected to

yield? Why, if I were to expose my ignorance, the dairy-maid would laugh in my face, and I am just as ignorant of poultry-yards and store-rooms. Douglas knows this, and quite agrees that Lilian should keep her old duties, and yet she refuses to listen to us."

"You have talked Douglas over," returned Lilian a little reproachfully; "he sees with your eyes now, and so there are two against me. But I mean to fight it out, Araby. I will not allow you to shirk your responsibilities in this way. If you are ignorant as you say, you are clever enough to learn, and I shall always be glad to help you. I will be your working housekeeper and keep on some of my old duties, but I shall account to you for everything I do. You or Douglas must examine my bee-book and poultry accounts, as well as my dairy business. It is no use your talking, Araby, no argument would make me change my mind; it is fully made up. On the day you and Douglas are married I lay down my old sceptre." An interruption occurred. The ayah came in quest of her young mistress; a milliner's box had arrived which needed immediate attention, and Araby excused herself somewhat reluctantly.

"What a nuisance dress is!" she observed; "but I am afraid I must leave you for a quarter of an hour. Very well, Lalla, I am coming," and Araby glided behind the curtains.

"Does she really mean it?" was Eunice's first question when she found herself alone with her friend. "Of course, as Araby puts it, it sounds rather nice."

"Yes, it sounds nice," agreed Lilian; "and if I did not know Araby as I do I might be tempted to listen to her; but I understand her too well. To-day she is a little scared at the thought of her new responsibilities, and she would like me to take them on my shoulders. She has constructed an ideal life for herself and Douglas. Theoretically she will interest herself in his work; they will walk or ride out together, and he will detail all his schemes to her; but housekeeping and domestic business

are not to her taste. She would prefer to carry on her studies, and lead her old life in her fresh environment."

"Well," as Lilian paused, "one can hardly wonder that Araby feels reluctant to take your place, when she is so conscious of her own unfitness."

"Oh, you are taking her part too," and Lilian's voice was a little tired. "Even Douglas thinks she is right, and was arguing with me ever so long this morning; but you are both making a mistake. Araby will change her mind before she has been married many weeks, and then the position of nominal mistress will not suit her at all. I am obliged to speak plainly, or you would not understand me, Eunice, but indeed I mean it in all kindness. We cannot always help our nature; it is sometimes too strong for us. It is Araby's nature to monopolise; she must have all or nothing; even her own indolence and sense of comfort would yield to her wish to enlarge her influence and her powers. Believe me, dear, it is far better to withdraw now gracefully, than for her to find me in the way," and Lilian's eyes darkened with a sudden look of determination.

"Dear Lilian, I will not say another word. After all, no one can judge so well as you. I am only sorry that Araby should have raised the question, and it is early days yet."

"Yes, but the time will pass so quickly," returned Lilian with a sigh. "Do you know the day is already fixed, Eunice? they are to be married in June, so there are barely five months. Douglas says there is no occasion for delay; he is such a boy for settling things quickly. They have decided on a trip to Paris. Oh, they almost took my breath away on Sunday; but as Douglas said truly, the thing had hung fire so long that he did not intend to put up with any more nonsense. But he has had no difficulty with Araby; she has been quite ready to promise anything."

"Poor Lilian!" observed Eunice sympathetically, as

she stroked her hand; but the girl drew it away with a little laugh.

"No, you must not pity me. I mean to be as happy as possible, and play my favourite part of Brownie—you know that is Douglas's pet name for me. By the bye, Eunice, I want to tell you something. You remember that sunny south room, that we always call the Lucky Chamber from some old family tradition?"

"You mean the room with the big oriel window that looks over the Hill Meadow?" returned Eunice. "I told you I liked it better than any room in the house."

"So does Douglas, and he means to fit it up as a sort of morning-room and study combined for Araby. She has a great fancy for Sheraton, and he picked up a lovely cabinet second-hand the other day. We have one or two nice things in the house which we shall transfer to the Lucky Chamber, but you must not breathe a word of it to Miss Jem; it is to be a surprise to Araby." Lilian had only just finished her sentence when Araby returned, looking bright and animated, and Douglas Hilton followed her. He seemed a little taken aback when he saw Eunice, and shook hands with her rather silently.

"It has begun to snow," observed Araby, addressing Lilian. "Douglas's coat was quite white when he came in; he looked like the Miller of Dee. I don't know how you are to get to Medhurst to-night, for he cannot possibly see his way to drive."

"My dear Arab, it is only a snow-shower," returned Douglas quietly. "We shall have a clear night in another hour or two, and Friar never stumbles. Lilian has no nerves. I think if I were to upset her in a ditch, she would only pick herself up and laugh."

"I wish I were like her," observed Araby in a low voice; but here Eunice rose.

"I think I had better go now, before it gets worse," she said hurriedly. "No, I cannot stay," as Araby seemed inclined to remonstrate. "I promised Miss Jem

that I would be back by half-past six, and it struck six a quarter of an hour ago."

"But you cannot go alone, Miss Cleveland," remonstrated Douglas; "you could easily lose your way between here and the Dene," and here he looked at Araby a little anxiously.

"It is a great pity that both Ian and Cecil are away," she said hastily, "and our man is out too. I think you will have to wait, Eunice; necessity knows no law," but Araby's manner was a trifle bored.

"I cannot wait," returned Eunice firmly, "and, indeed, I can very well go alone."

"I suppose you will not refuse my escort," observed Douglas rather gravely, "for I certainly cannot permit you, or any other lady, to leave the house unattended on such a night." There was a tone of finality about Douglas's speech that convinced Eunice that words would be vain.

Araby seemed to struggle with herself; she was evidently not pleased, though her good sense told her that it was impossible for any gentleman to act otherwise. She bade Eunice good-bye rather coldly, and asked Lilian to help her on with her wraps. As the girls passed between the curtains, Douglas put his hands on Araby's shoulders, and looked quietly in her eyes.

"You know you are a naughty child, Arab." Then a smile came to the girl's lips.

"I did not mean to be disagreeable," she returned penitently; "but it has been such a long day, and I have been looking forward to this evening; and now, instead of our nice talk, you will be walking to the Dene with Miss Cleveland."

"But I shall be back in twenty minutes, and we can have our talk then. I am afraid, dear, your manner made Miss Cleveland rather uncomfortable; she did not want me to go, any one could see that."

"I am afraid I was selfish, Douglas," sighed Araby; "I always am where you are concerned." Then he smiled

as he stooped over her and kissed her hair. How could his man's vanity fail to be flattered by such devotion? nevertheless, his face was as grave and impassible as usual when he joined Eunice.

Eunice felt desperately uncomfortable; never had the ten minutes' walk seemed so long. Douglas held up her umbrella, and told her quietly that, as the path was a little slippery, she had better take his arm; and she had not dared to refuse.

If only she could think of something to say; but his silence seemed to infect her. He only spoke once or twice; first to warn her against snags in the avenue, and another time he remarked that the weather was unusually severe, and that he expected they would have good skating if the frost lasted.

This was an opening. Eunice observed timidly that she had never skated in her life, and then she asked if Lilian and Miss Pater were proficient in it.

"I believe so—yes, certainly," he replied, rather absently; and then he added that the exercise was considered too violent for Araby. "She is our best skater," he said regretfully; "but last winter she fainted after an afternoon on the ice, and the doctor prohibited all skating for the future. Ah, here we are at the Dene," interrupting himself. "I hope you are not wet, Miss Cleveland. Will you give my love to Miss Jem, please, as I cannot come in?" and as the door opened he turned away.

"Oh, why is he so different?" thought Eunice sadly; "he never seems to have anything to say to me now. There will be skating on the fishpond, but he never asked me to come and watch them. I wonder if people are always so changed when they are engaged?" But she little knew that Douglas's thoughts were equally unsatisfactory.

"I feel such a fool," he said to himself, "when I am with her, I hardly dare open my mouth; it is best for us to be strangers. Lilian will be wanting to have her over for the skating. Lil, dear little soul, is always wishing

to give her pleasure; but I shall have to drop a hint. I have to consider Araby now, and those bicycle lessons cost me dearly enough," and here Douglas frowned at some remembrances and walked on quickly, slamming the gate of Chez-Nous behind him.

"Well, now, to think of Douglas bringing you back and not coming in to see me!" exclaimed Miss Jem, as Eunice repeated his message. "I was just wondering to Mr. Desmond how you would be getting home, but I never thought of Douglas."

"Mr. Desmond has been here, then?"

"Yes, and I wanted him to stay to dinner, but he would not hear of it; but we have had a nice long talk. He said such an odd thing, Eunice. I was talking of sending Andrew to fetch you, and he pulled his moustache in the way he does when he is amused, and said he would willingly have offered his escort, only he was too well aware that you preferred his room to his company. 'I am afraid Miss Cleveland rather dislikes me than otherwise'—those were his very words, Eunice; and though he pretended to laugh it off, he looked a bit hurt."

"Dear Miss Jem, how is one to help one's likes and dislikes?" observed Eunice regretfully. "I am afraid it is the truth that I do not care for Mr. Desmond."

"And sorry I am to hear you say it, when we are such good friends, he and I," and Jem's voice was so sad and wistful that Eunice knelt down before her and took her hands affectionately.

"Don't be sorry, dear; I will do my best to get over the feeling, and I will behave very nicely to Mr. Desmond on Thursday." Then Jem's face cleared, and the rest of the evening passed as tranquilly as usual.

CHAPTER XXVII

"OUR NEIGHBOUR MR. DESMOND"

Conversation becomes painful when replies are made, not to words uttered, but to words suppressed.—CARMEN SYLVA.

THE frost showed no sign of breaking up, and the Friars' fishpond was a sheet of ice; nevertheless, to Douglas Hilton's surprise, Lilian said nothing about a skating-party; even when he suggested asking a few of their neighbours to meet the Paters, she quietly negatived the idea.

Douglas looked rather surprised, and yet he felt relieved. "You are getting lazy, Brownie," he said in a joking voice, "and the fishpond parties have always been so popular." For at such times the garden had been lighted up by an immense bonfire, and curious old-fashioned lanterns suspended from the trees.

"I think we had better leave it alone this year," she returned gently. "One cannot trust Araby; there would be no keeping her in the house. Why not ask the Major over to luncheon, and you might have the Martingales to meet him?" And as Douglas willingly agreed to this, the subject dropped.

Lilian seldom made mistakes where other people were concerned; her intuition was remarkably clear. She knew that Douglas's good-natured offer to give Eunice bicycling lessons had roused Araby's jealousy, and had led to a serious breach between them; and not even her wish to add to Eunice's enjoyment would have induced her to risk another misunderstanding. It was better for Eunice to keep away from Monkbarn just now, and she told herself that her own visits to the Dene should be more frequent to make up for her apparent lack of hos-

pitality. "Things cannot go on just the same," she thought; but she never allowed even to herself that there was a certain strain of anxiety, a sense of tension, that was very wearing. In her secret consciousness she knew well that Douglas was making a grievous mistake, and that Araby would never be the wife he needed; but though her heart yearned over him with the tenderest sympathy and pity, she knew that she could help him best by keeping him up to his duty.

Eunice had been greatly touched and gratified on the morning after her visit to Chez-Nous by receiving a beautiful basket of hothouse flowers. "With Araby's love," was written on the card, and Eunice at once guessed that this was her *amende honorable*. Araby always showed her penitence in a pretty, picturesque way; and doubtless her conscience told her that she had been lacking in kindness the previous day.

Eunice was quite prepared to be on her best behaviour on Thursday; and when Mr. Desmond was announced somewhat early, and Miss Jem had not yet made her appearance in the drawing-room, she received him so graciously that he was somewhat surprised.

"It is such a cold night," she said brightly, "do please come nearer the fire. I have not seen you for a long time, Mr. Desmond. I am generally out when you call." Then Mr. Desmond narrowed his eyes, and glanced at her sharply as though he suspected some esoteric meaning; but Eunice had spoken quite simply and without any *arrière pensée*. Mr. Desmond was looking handsomer than ever that night; evening dress exactly suited him. If his coat was a little worn and had lost its first gloss, it was well cut and fitted him superbly. One of his acquaintances had once said of him, "Keefe Desmond has more than his fair share of physical advantages. Why, the fellow has the head of a Greek god, and a voice that would have been worth a fortune to a rising politician, if he had only a conscience," with meaning emphasis; "but women would never discover the omission

—he is too good an actor, and those Irish-grey eyes can be expressive enough when their owner chooses."

Jem came bustling into the room before Mr. Desmond was ready with his answer. She looked heated and nervous, and her face was a little too high-coloured to harmonise with the smart green brocade; and as she had run riot in her jewel-casket, the result was rather too brilliant altogether.

"Why, to think of my being so late!" observed Jem with a little gasp, for she was quite out of breath. "It was that rogue Billy who hindered me. He had got my box of trinkets all tumbled out on the bed, and Susan and I had quite a work to pick the things up. He won't part with the bangles, Eunice; he is playing with them now."

"Billy is ruined for life. How do you suppose that I am to manage him after this prolonged course of spoiling?" Mr. Desmond spoke in his usual easy fashion. He was still standing before the fireplace with one arm leaning against the mantelpiece. Now and then as he talked to his hostess he glanced under his eyelids at Eunice. Perhaps the girl's fresh face and quiet dress were more to his taste than Jem's flushed cheeks and splendid raiment. Nevertheless, Jem bridled consciously every time he looked at her.

"Whatever makes the Major so late?" she exclaimed when nearly a quarter of an hour had elapsed; but at that instant Rachel announced him, and the next moment the two gentlemen were introduced. "Major Ford, this is our neighbour Mr. Desmond," began Jem glibly; but to her surprise the two men looked at each other, and bowed rather stiffly. Mr. Desmond indeed changed colour, and seemed decidedly embarrassed.

"I believe I have met this gentleman before," observed the little Major. "I am not wrong in thinking I am addressing Keefe Desmond?" Then Mr. Desmond bowed again; he seemed extremely discomposed. "It was in our salad days," continued Major Ford airily, and

addressing Jem; "but I had no idea when I accepted your pleasant invitation that I should meet an old acquaintance. It is so many years ago that it is rather surprising that we should recognise each other."

"Oh, you have not changed much," replied Mr. Desmond, trying to imitate the other's ease of manner, but failing signally; "but you are somewhat burnt by Indian sun. The climate played the deuce with poor Jack Hamill. I suppose you know he is dead?"

"I was with him when he died," returned Major Ford rather dryly. "Miss Jem, am I to take you in to dinner?" and then there was a move to the dining-room.

Poor Miss Jem! As she said afterwards to Eunice, her quartette party was a complete failure.

"I can't make out what ailed the Major," she remarked ruefully. "He is generally so chatty and sociable, and such good company with his stories and jokes, and he was as solemn as possible all dinner-time. He just talked to me and to no one else, and would not give me a chance of speaking to Mr. Desmond. You had him all to yourself, Eunice; but you were a good girl, and did your part famously."

Yes, she had done her part, Eunice thought, but it had not been easy. Mr. Desmond had been unusually glum and silent, and had left the brunt of the conversation on her shoulders. Even when Major Ford addressed him, as he did from time to time, his answers were curt and obviously constrained.

"I don't believe either of them enjoyed their dinner a bit," continued Jem in a disappointed voice. "They were just staring at each other like two tom-cats in a garret. The Major always likes his cigarette after dinner; but, bless you, his company was not good enough for him, so he followed us in the moment he had swallowed his coffee; and as for Mrs. Tina expecting him back early, that is all rubbish. I mean to have it out with him when I get him alone," and Jem's tone was decidedly huffy. The evening had given no one pleasure;

even Mr. Desmond had seemed anxious to take his departure.

Eunice did her best to smooth matters, but Miss Jem was too much hurt to be easily consoled. She went off to bed somewhat moodily. Eunice thought it best to leave her alone. Major Ford's manner to Mr. Desmond had renewed all her own uneasiness, and she longed to talk things over with Lilian.

She found her opportunity the very next day, for in the afternoon Miss Jem sent her across to Chez-Nous with a message for Araby, and to her delight Lilian received her.

"Araby is not well, Eunice," she said; "and Mrs. Pater sent a note early this morning to ask me to come and sit with her, as she and Captain Pater were obliged to go to Shelgate on business. I believe the Major is in the smoking-room; he has been skating all day. I daresay he will join us at tea."

"Miss Jem said I need not hurry back," replied Eunice; "but if Araby wants you——" But Lilian soon set her mind at rest on this point.

"We have been talking for hours," she returned; "and I have left her to take a nap. When she rings Lalla will make her a cup of strong coffee, and then she hopes to be able to get up. Douglas is dining here this evening, and of course she is anxious to see him. Now tell me about last evening, Eunice. I hear Mr. Desmond was there. Araby has got an idea that the Major had not enjoyed himself as much as usual, but I hope that was her fancy." Then Eunice, nothing loth, gave Lilian a graphic account of the evening.

"The whole thing was as flat as possible," she continued. "Any child could see that Major Ford was not a bit at his ease. He was quite civil to Mr. Desmond, but I am sure that for some reason he dislikes him. Perhaps he knows too much about him. Oh, Lilian, do you think we could ask him to tell us?"

"We might try," returned Lilian thoughtfully, and it

was evident from her manner that she shared her friend's uneasiness. "If we cannot induce him to speak, I shall turn him over to Douglas." And at this moment Major Ford entered the room.

"I hope you two ladies are not plotting mischief," he observed gaily, "for you both look very serious. I trust Miss Durnford is all right." Then Eunice assured him that she was as well as usual.

There was rather an awkward pause after this, for both the girls were wondering how they were to begin the subject; but, to their relief, Major Ford led up to it.

"By the bye, Miss Cleveland," he observed easily, "I was going to ask you how Miss Jem made Mr. Desmond's acquaintance. I was quite taken aback when I found he was on visiting terms at the Dene. When I last heard of him he was in America, and it was certainly rather a surprise to meet him at Shepperton."

"He is a neighbour of ours," returned Eunice, exchanging a glance with Lilian as though to bespeak her help. "He has been lodging for some months at Honey Hanger in Birdhurst Lane. It was through his little boy Billy that Miss Jem first made his acquaintance. She has been very kind to the child, and has nursed him through a serious illness."

"Yes, I see," replied the Major, pulling his sandy moustache in rather a dissatisfied manner. "I know my old friend Miss Jem is rather prone to pick up all sorts and conditions of men. Floris tells me that he does not visit here, Miss Hilton."

"Oh no," replied Lilian, "nor at Monkbarn either, though Douglas brought him in to luncheon the day he was sketching our old gateway. We did not take much to Mr. Desmond. He is clever and gentlemanly, but, as Douglas says, we know nothing about him."

"Ah, just so!" But it was evident to both the girls that the Major had no intention of enlightening them.

"I must speak more plainly," thought Lilian, as Eunice gave her another appealing look.

"We are all somewhat troubled at this sudden intimacy," she observed seriously. "You know how simple and unsuspecting Miss Jem is. More than once Douglas and I have helped her out of some difficulty or other, brought on by her very kindness of heart. Douglas cannot bear to see her so taken in; but when she is infatuated with a person you cannot induce her to listen to reason."

"I hope she has better taste than to be infatuated with Desmond!" exclaimed the Major with rather a disgusted air. Then Lilian shook her head rather meaningly.

"He has great influence over her, has he not, Eunice? And he is there every day. Miss Jem cannot bring herself to part with Billy, and of course that gives him a pretext for his visits. Miss Cleveland was only talking to me just now. She is very uneasy about it. She has never liked Mr. Desmond; but of course in her position she can do little."

"If we had only something to go on," observed Eunice in a troubled tone. "We have never met any one before who could tell us anything about him; but if you know him, Major Ford——" and here she looked at him pleadingly.

"Oh, it is none of my business," returned the Major in a disturbed tone. It was all very well to be stiff and stand-offish with a man whom one regarded as an undesirable acquaintance, but it was quite another thing to play the spy and blacken his character; and Cecil Ford certainly did not relish the situation.

"I knew him very little," he continued. "It was Jack Hamill who was his crony; and as we were all mere lads at the time, it is all ancient history."

"And you will not tell us anything about him?" exclaimed Eunice. She was sadly disappointed. "Indeed, indeed, Major Ford, for Miss Jem's sake, I think you ought to speak——" But Lilian interrupted her.

"Perhaps Major Ford would rather talk to Douglas," she said quietly, and as usual she was right. It ended

in a sort of compromise. The Major owned that he would greatly prefer to hold his tongue altogether, but that if Hilton chose to question him he would not refuse to answer him. And with this Lilian professed herself entirely content.

"Now, don't worry about it any more," she said as she bade Eunice good-bye. "I will talk to Douglas, and he will very soon get the information we want. Major Ford is coming to Monkbarn to-morrow, and he will stop the night. Douglas will have a good opportunity of talking to him." And then Eunice went on her way.

She found Miss Jem more cheerful. Mr. Desmond had been and had explained matters.

"He owned quite frankly that he and the Major had not hit it off, Eunice," she observed. "They had a bit of a scrimmage when they were lads together, and the quarrel had never been made up. 'We had never met from that day to this,' he went on, 'and as I had been in the wrong, it was not exactly pleasant to find myself opposite the Major, especially as his manner told me that he had not forgotten the old grudge.'"

"And was this all he told you?"

"Yes, but he was nicer than ever. He had Billy fetched down, and he told him stories, such beautiful stories too; and we were as comfortable and happy as possible. He says I am the only friend he has got in Shepperton, and he begged me with tears in his eyes never to turn against him. 'Let me feel there is always a welcome for me at the Dene'—these were his very words, Eunice. I could have cried to hear him, poor fellow; he is lonely." Eunice returned a vague answer. She thought it prudent to keep her thoughts to herself. For the first time the suspicion crossed her mind that Miss Jem had contrived the errand to Chez-Nous to keep her away while Mr. Desmond paid his visit, but the next moment she dismissed the supposition. Miss Jem was far too guileless and simple to form such a design.

Two or three days passed, but there was no word from

Lilian, and Eunice was just getting anxious and perplexed at the long silence, when one morning a note was brought to her.

"Dear Eunice," wrote Lilian, "I am so provoked! I was hoping to come over to Shepperton and spend some hours at the Dene, but I have been silly enough to sprain my ankle—not badly, oh dear no! but Douglas will not hear of my moving off the couch.

"Now, I have a little plan to propose, if Miss Jem will be good enough to agree to it. Douglas will be driving in to-morrow early, as he is going to town with the Paters for a couple of days. The roads are much better now, and, if you will not mind the open phaeton, Gregson will bring you all right, and we can spend the day together. Tell Miss Jem that she must let me keep you for the night, and I will send you safely back the following afternoon. Do come, Eunice, it will be such a boon, for I am not quite inclined for my own company and the Friars'."

"Dear me," fussed Miss Jem when Eunice read her this note. "Haven't I told her over and over again that she would have an accident if she would go scrambling up those ladders in the apple-loft. She is downright venturesome. I never knew such a girl for climbing, and Douglas only encourages her."

"Do you think you could spare me?" asked Eunice wistfully; but she need not have asked the question.

"Lor' bless you, child!" replied Miss Jem energetically, "do you think I would be keeping you when Lilian is wanting you? Why, she is as dull as dull can be, any one can see that, and she is all alone too. I would drive over myself and fetch you back on Wednesday, only Mrs. Whitelaw is coming about the Rummage Sale, and I am forced to stay in; but don't you be hurrying back if Lilian wants you. I have got Billy, so I am not lonely—though I never like parting with you, and that's the truth, Eunice," and Jem looked at the girl affectionately as she spoke.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A HARVEST OF TARES

It is only hatred, not love, that requires explanation.
—J. PAUL RICHTER.

He weighed the faults of others in the scales of charity.
—WORDSWORTH, of Tom Poole.

EUNICE was quite ready when, at the appointed time, Gregson and the phaeton appeared. Lilian's thoughtfulness had provided so many warm wraps and rugs that it was impossible to feel the cold, and Eunice quite enjoyed the long drive to Medfield.

It was always a happiness to her to be with Lilian, and the prospect of spending four-and-twenty hours at Monkbarn in free and unrestrained intercourse with her friend gave her a great deal of pleasure.

Life could not be entirely barren while she had Lilian and her dear Miss Jem and her own home people. Eunice's nature was too sound and true to allow any secret disappointment or frustrated hope to spoil her life. "One cannot have all one wishes in this world," she would say to herself, "but I have my good things too." Nevertheless, as she passed through the Friars' Hall on her way to the white parlour, she felt a sudden cold thrill at the remembrance of Christmas night.

Lilian was lying on the couch by the fire with a little table beside her heaped up with account-books and bill files. She looked pale and a trifle dull, but she welcomed Eunice with her old smile.

"Dear, it is so sweet of you to come, and it was so kind of Miss Jem to spare you to me. I wanted to talk to you so badly, and I did not know how I was to get at

you; and then Douglas proposed that you should come over for the night—and wasn't I grateful to him for the suggestion?"

"I was grateful too," returned Eunice affectionately. "Lilian, Miss Jem was in such a fuss when she heard you had sprained your ankle; she declared you had been climbing up ladders, or doing something you ought not."

"Oh dear no, it was just my carelessness," laughed Lilian. "I was running downstairs, when I caught my foot in a loose bit of braid at the bottom of my dress. I had no idea the braid wanted mending, but I could not save myself, and my foot was doubled up under me. Douglas had to carry me in here. He declares he shall begin to believe the Friars have a spite against us after all if they go on playing these sort of tricks; but, as I explained to him, the poor old things are not to blame because I neglected to mend my dress. We must be fair even to ghosts, Eunice; and now will you go upstairs?—you know the way to the spare room—and by the time you come down luncheon will be ready here."

Eunice did as she was bid. She was dying to ask Lilian if Major Ford had given the desired information, but something in Lilian's manner prevented her from entering on the subject. Very probably she would wait until they were likely to be undisturbed, and then speak of her own accord.

"I am afraid something is worrying her," she said to herself as she walked slowly down the corridor; and then she took possession of her comfortable room and unpacked her portmanteau as quickly as possible.

They talked on casual subjects during luncheon. Rhoda was present most of the time waiting on them both; but as soon as the meal had been cleared away, and the maid had withdrawn, Lilian begged Eunice to wheel up an easy-chair close to her couch.

"No one will interrupt us until tea-time," she said. "You have been very good and patient, dear, but indeed I could not speak before. Major Ford has told Douglas

everything, and they wished me to tell Miss Jem. That is why I was coming over to the Dene yesterday when this stupid accident happened."

"Well?" rather breathlessly.

"Oh, it is a long story, but I daresay you will not be tired of listening. Do not interrupt me if you can help it; we can discuss it afterwards," and then Lilian began her narrative. Its substance was as follows.

When Major Ford was a young subaltern, he and his friend Jack Hamill were quartered with part of their regiment at Dublin. The young men had been at Woolwich together, and had studied under the same army crammer, and they had obtained their commissions at the same time. Jack was a sociable fellow, and soon became popular in the regiment. He had a mania for making new acquaintances. One day he began raving about a young Irishman he had met who was at the University. Cecil Ford, who knew his man, and was quite aware that all Jack's geese were swans, listened rather incredulously to his description of Keefe Desmond.

He was the handsomest fellow he had ever seen in his life—he ought to have been an artist's model; and he was so clever and amusing—he could take off people to the life—it was as good as a play to hear him; and he could sing, and reel out poetry by the yard; and as for tennis and billiards, no one could beat him. But, in spite of this splendid eulogy, Cecil Ford manifested no desire to be introduced to this Admirable Crichton.

By and by Jack turned a little sulky. "Hang it all, Cecil," he said one day, "you are hail-fellow-well-met with all sorts of Johnnies, and I don't know why you won't make Desmond's acquaintance. He is quite as respectable as the other fellows. His father is vicar of Lisgard, a small country parish a few miles from here. I walked out last Sunday with Desmond to hear the old gentleman preach. He is a splendid old fellow—just your sort; and he looked quite a picture in the pulpit with his white hair. I am not much of a judge of ser-

mons, but it seemed good stuff in its way." And then Cecil Ford agreed, rather reluctantly, to walk over to Lisgard the following evening with Jack and Keefe Desmond.

As soon as he saw the latter he was obliged to own that Jack's description had not been exaggerated; the young man's splendid physique and striking personality impressed him strongly. Perhaps he saw him at his best that Sunday evening.

But if he gave a grudging admiration to Keefe Desmond, he was more than charmed with the Vicarage and its inmates. In his opinion, the Rev. Peter Desmond was the ideal of a country vicar.

There was an Arcadian simplicity about him which, with his white hair and fine old face, appealed to him irresistibly. He had married late in life, and, as he told Cecil, Keefe was his Benjamin—the child of his old age. His wife had died many years ago, and his one daughter, who lived with him, was much older than Keefe, and a confirmed invalid. She was a sweet-faced woman, and looked a patient, gentle creature, and evidently bore her heavy infirmities without repining. Cecil Ford was so much pleased with his visit, and he and the elder Mr. Desmond took so much to each other, that it became a habit with him to walk over to Lisgard on Sunday evenings when the weather was fine. Sometimes Jack and Keefe Desmond accompanied him, but more often he went alone. When the short evening service was over he would partake of their frugal repast, and then the old vicar would walk with him a mile or so, and all the way he would talk of his boy—his cleverness and his wonderful gifts—to all of which Cecil listened in silence. But in his heart he neither liked nor trusted Keefe Desmond, and as he grew to know him better he regretted still more Jack's strong infatuation; but he was powerless to interfere. Jack was completely under Desmond's influence, and Cecil was too young and ignorant of the world to know how to act.

"It is no use saying a word to Jack," he thought disconsolately. "Desmond has got him under his thumb, and can make him believe black's white, he is so plausible and clever. Jack has taken the wrong bit in his mouth, and if he is not careful he will be in a deuce of a mess. Jack's people are not rich, and if he gets into debt it will be a crying shame, and his mother a widow, too."

Before many weeks were over Cecil's uneasiness increased, and one Sunday evening when he walked to Lisgard there were signs of trouble at the Vicarage. The old man looked feeble and tremulous, and complained of faintness when the service was over. "I am getting an old man, Mr. Ford," he said in a trembling voice; "few and evil have been my days, like Jacob. Keefe was here yesterday. He was in trouble, and that worried me. He has been extravagant and foolish—culpably so, Catherine tells me, but she does not understand a young man's temptations. 'We must judge not, that we be not judged.' He is my only son—my only son. How could I bring myself to be hard to him?" His voice died away, and his white head drooped heavily on his breast. Cecil, who felt alarmed by his manner, hurried off to find Miss Desmond.

He found her in tears, and hardly able to speak for agitation.

"Yes, I know," she said at last, "but there is nothing to be done—my poor father! Keefe is breaking his heart. After all his promises he is in debt again, and our little savings must go to save him from exposure and disgrace. Mr. Hamill is in debt too. If you want to save your friend, Mr. Ford, you must keep him away from Keefe." Poor Catherine, she spoke excitedly and with bitterness, but her heart was sore.

There was nothing he could do for them, so he took his leave sorrowfully. One thing the old man said to him as he held his hand—"If you see my boy, tell him not to keep away from us. Catherine was a trifle too hard to him yesterday, but he is a lad still. We are all

prodigals, Mr. Ford, and have taken our fill of husks; it is well for us that we have a merciful Father. And—and—give my love to Keefe, and tell him that I shall count the hours till he comes." But Keefe Desmond never received this message.

Cecil was very anxious to warn Jack, but unfortunately the next few days were to be devoted to some grand field manœuvres, and as he and his friend were in different camps they did not meet. On their return to barracks a fellow-officer told Cecil that Keefe Desmond had disappeared, leaving all his debts unpaid, and that no one knew what had become of him.

He hurried off at once in search of Jack. It was a hot, oppressive evening, and he found him lying back in his hammock-chair, looking utterly dejected and out of spirits. He looked up at Cecil without speaking.

"My dear fellow, what am I to say to you?" Then Jack gave a ghastly sort of smile.

"Say what you like; call me a fool, a confounded obstinate fool if you will—anything but a scoundrel."

"No, no, I will keep that word for——" but he had not the heart to finish his sentence when he saw Jack's expression.

"Don't, Cecil; don't you see that that is the hardest part of all—that I cannot defend him? I knew he was wild and reckless, that he was not quite straight, but I never believed that he could have done this."

"It was the meanest trick that a man could play," returned Cecil in hot indignation, and then he told Jack about his visit to the Vicarage. "He is breaking his father's heart—Miss Catherine told me so. They have given him all their poor little savings, and the fellow actually took the money; it was two or three hundred, all that they had to give, but they were so afraid of the public disgrace if it were to reach the ears of the authorities."

"It came too late to save him," returned Jack gloomily; "he would not have been allowed to remain at the

University. I am afraid it was a worse business than we knew, Cecil. There was some woman—an actress, I believe, whom he met at a music-hall, and I think she has had a hand in the matter. I only saw him for a moment; he looked terribly cut up and half beside himself.

"'You will be well rid of me, Jack; I am not fit society for any decent fellow, and I have never done you any good,' but he would not shake hands with me or say another word."

"Has the woman gone off with him too?"

"I believe so, but I know nothing for certain. Isn't it a rotten business? It makes me sick to think of it, and yet in spite of it all I feel sorry for the fellow."

Cecil suppressed a strong exclamation.

"Look here, Cecil," continued Jack, "what do you think I have done? I was so beastly miserable that I went down to the Major and made a clean breast of everything. He was like a father to me."

Then Cecil's eyes grew bright. "That was downright plucky of you," he returned. "Whatever put it into your head?"

"Oh, I know other fellows talked to him when they got into trouble—why, even Berkeley, who used to jeer at him for his prayer-meetings and Bible-classes, went to him when he got into hot water with the Colonel. I tell you what, old chap, I will never say another word against him. He may be a bit of a Methodist, but his religion is the real thing; he has given me advice that I mean to follow, and he's going to help me, God bless him!" went on Jack, with tears in his eyes, "and if ever I am in a tight corner again I shall deserve a horse-whipping, and I hope I shall get it," he continued, with a laugh that hid deeper feelings.

Cecil was much relieved by this conversation. He knew Jack had done a wise and manly thing to confide in Major Hammond. No better Christian or truer gentleman ever lived, and his influence with the young men

of the regiment, subaltern and private alike, was almost boundless; he had known trouble himself, and his sympathy was so human. "Our Major is a saint," Tommy Atkins would say; "if a poor chap is in a hole, he will take any amount of trouble to pull him out; and if it makes him comfortable to put up a prayer, it is not for the likes of us to object; and I mean to go to his Bible-class just because he asked me."

But though Cecil was relieved about Jack, he was sorely disquieted at the news which reached him from Lisgard. Keefe's disappearance had reached the old man's ears, and the shock had resulted in a stroke of paralysis. He lingered on for a month or so, but he never regained full consciousness. Just before his death they heard him muttering to himself, and Catherine stooped over him to catch the half-articulated words: "He has gone into a far country, but he will come back, but he must not miss his father's blessing," and then he looked wistfully at Catherine, but no more words came; and very soon it was all over—the tender, tormented heart was at rest.

Cecil went to bid Catherine Desmond good-bye before he left Dublin; they had just been ordered to India. The poor woman looked very ill; her disease was making swift progress, but a benevolent friend had provided a refuge for her last days. "She knew that there was only the workhouse before me," she said with a patient smile, "but she would not let my father's daughter come to that." Catherine had heard no word of her brother when Cecil took his leave.

She bade him good-bye almost solemnly; she did not live many months after that.

So Cecil Ford and Jack Hamill went to India, and played their parts bravely in one of the frontier wars. Cecil got his captaincy, but poor Jack was badly wounded, and was ordered home to rest and recruit; and it was during this time that he and Keefe Desmond met again. Later on, when he returned to India, he gave Cecil the full particulars.

He was on his way to the north to join a shooting-party, when a breakdown on the line obliged him to spend the night at a small country-town. The guard told him that there was a tolerable inn, where he could be comfortable; and as there was no chance of continuing his journey until the next morning, he accepted the inevitable with the best grace he could muster. Mexfield was a sleepy little place, and on a wet evening the prospect from the "Bell and Dragon" was not very enlivening. As he ate his solitary chop in the coffee-room, two young farmers came in and ordered some hot whisky-and-water; Jack with his usual sociability accosted them, and in the course of conversation they told him that a company of strolling actors were performing that night for the manager's benefit. "They say that Nona Maddox is rather a good actress; her husband, Claud Maddox, is acting in the same piece," observed one of the young men. "It is 'The Gipsy Bride;' they played it at the Lyric—perhaps you may have seen it, sir." But Jack, who had been an invalid, had given the London theatres a wide berth.

"Well, we must be going, Joe, if we want to get good places," remarked his companion, and then they bade him a civil good-night. It was still raining, but the theatre was not many yards away, so Jack, who was bored with his own company, determined to follow them. The theatre was somewhat empty, and he had the stalls to himself. To his surprise the piece was interesting and fairly well acted, and the Gipsy Bride herself was a distinctly handsome woman. But the character of Squire Gregory attracted him most; the reckless spendthrift, who had brought himself to ruin, was admirably rendered. More than once, as Claud Maddox crossed the stage, a sudden memory of his old chum Keefe Desmond flashed before him; something in the actor's carriage and deep vibrant tones recalled him, but the stage make-up was a sufficient disguise, and throughout the piece Jack had no notion that it was actually Keefe Desmond who played the part of Squire.

Just as the curtain dropped, a note was brought to him.

"Jack, old fellow, I ought not to do it, but the temptation is too strong. If you care to do a kindness to an unfortunate beggar, come behind the scenes. I am not in the farce, though my wife is acting.

"KEEFE DESMOND, *alias* CLAUD MADDOX."

Jack Hamill felt quite stunned when he read the scrawl. His conscience told him that it would be wiser to leave the theatre without an interview with his old chum; but he was too kind-hearted to refuse, and a few minutes later the messenger was leading him behind the stage to a bare little room, where Keefe, still in his stage dress, awaited him.

"Jack," he said, grasping his hand, "you are a good fellow! When I saw your face I thought I should have broken down, but I got through it somehow. Look here, can you wait a moment, while I get rid of these things? The little chap's ill, and I must be getting back to him, for Nona's no use at all. I had to marry her," he continued ruefully; "she would not let me off; but I cursed the day I did it, for the life she leads me and the boy is punishment enough for all my sins." And Keefe gave a despairing groan as he spoke.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WE MUST REAP AS WE SOW"

The tissue of the life to be
  We weave with colours all our own;
And in the field of destiny
  We reap as we have sown.

—WHITTIER.

THE Desmonds had lodgings over a tinman's shop at the corner of Market Street; it was also a tobacconist's. The staircase was steep and dark, and the sitting-room into which Keefe ushered his companion looked comfortless and squalid to the last degree. A black, cindery fire burned in the grate, and a smoky kerosene-lamp gave an imperfect light; the remains of a meal were still on the table, and there were coffee-stains on the dingy cloth; the chairs and couch were heaped up with stage properties and articles of female attire. Keefe looked round with a disgusted air as he swept a velvet cloak and an armful of spangled skirts off the only easy-chair; then he turned up the lamp and stirred the fire, but no cheerful blaze rewarded his efforts.

"Isn't this a comfortable home, Jack?" he said with a bitter sneer as he lighted a candle. "Will you come with me to see the boy? I am rather anxious about him."

Jack nodded, and they went together into an inner room; it felt close and airless. On the big tumbled bed lay a boy of about two years old, wrapped up in an old plaid; his head was bandaged, and he looked ill and feverish, but his heavy eyes brightened when he saw his father.

"Bill can't sleep; Bill has a sore head, dada," and then he held out his arms with an appealing look.

"I will take him into the next room," observed Keefe; "perhaps he will doze off while we are talking," and then he wrapped him up a little awkwardly, though not untenderly. The child was thirsty, so Jack volunteered to go in search of the landlady and ask her to warm some milk. On his return he set himself to mend the fire—he had begged for some wood,—and before long there was a cheery blaze.

"The boy looks ill," he said pitifully.

"Yes, he has taken cold, and I am a bad hand at nursing; children were never in my line, though I do my best for the poor little chap. He has a loving mother, Jack—look here!" and Keefe lifted the handkerchief and showed him a dark, discoloured bruise. "She had been drinking—not an uncommon thing—and he provoked her in some way, and she struck him so hard that he fell down and knocked his head against the fender. Bella was just mad with her; she told me she thought the child was killed."

"Good heavens! and who is Bella?"

"Bella is her precious sister. There are two of them, Jack—two millstones round my neck. She played the part of the Gipsy Queen; a big woman, but not so handsome as Nona. She lives with us, and the life those women lead me—it is a hell on earth, that is what it is," and Keefe's haggard, worn young face seemed to endorse his words.

He grew calmer presently under Jack's sympathy, and told him the whole miserable story. His mad infatuation for the beautiful actress, Nona Rodney, had led to his ruin. He was only a boy when he first met her, and she was a great many years older; her beauty was undeniable, but there was a strain of gipsy blood in her veins, and she was a lawless, undisciplined creature, with a passionate, ungovernable temper that seemed beyond her own control; but this he only found out later.

From the first Keefe's handsome face had attracted her, and her subtle flattery and devotion turned the poor

lad's head. Nona knew how to play upon his vanity. She assured him that with a little training he would make his fortune as an actor, and in an evil hour he listened to her and determined to go on the stage.

His debts had been mostly due to her, for more than once he had helped her in her difficulties; but he assured Jack, with tears in his eyes, that when he took the money from his father he fully intended to pay all he owed.

"It was the old story, Jack," he went on—"'the woman beguiled me and I did eat.' Nona came to me that night and tempted me, and—and—I was not myself. Perhaps it was the wine I took that inflamed my blood, but she had the mastery, curse her! Before morning we had left Dublin, and a day or two later we were married; and that was the end of Keefe Desmond."

There was very little to tell after this, and perhaps Keefe was unwilling to dwell on such unsavoury details. For a month or two his infatuation had lasted, and then one evening the veil was rudely torn from his eyes. He had just seen the announcement of his father's death in the paper, and had staggered home broken-hearted and almost crushed with remorse, to find Nona lying in a drunken sleep on the floor.

"I wonder I did not destroy myself, Jack," he groaned. "I know I meant to do it, for hours afterwards I found myself on one of the bridges looking at the water; there was not a creature in sight, not even a policeman. And yet, would you believe it? I felt as though a hand were on my shoulder holding me back, and a voice seemed to say in my ear, 'Don't be a coward, Keefe.' Jack, I felt as though my dear old dad were beside me, and then I suppose I fainted."

Keefe told his friend that he had been very ill after that, and in her way Nona had been good to him and nursed him. But the spell was broken, and disenchantment set in, and every day they drifted farther apart. The demon of drink had taken possession of Nona, and her folly and misconduct nearly ruined them. London

managers would no longer engage her; she gave them too much trouble. After her child was born they were compelled to leave London, and, as nothing better offered, they joined a company of strolling players; but it was a miserable existence.

Jack took his leave after this, for he was unwilling to remain until Nona and her sister returned from the theatre; but he made Keefe promise to have breakfast with him the next morning at the "Bell and Dragon," and they had a little more conversation.

Jack pressed some money upon him, though he was loth to take it, and gave him his address; but Keefe never wrote, and it was not until the night he left England to return to India that any news reached him.

The letter was curt and bitter. Nona had left him, and had gone off with some man to America. Bella had married some time before, and he and Billy were alone. His nerves were shattered, he told Jack, and he had been obliged to give up the stage; but a small windfall in the shape of a legacy from a distant relative would enable them to live for a year or so in tolerable comfort, while he made plans for the future. The last sentence of his letter was a great relief to Jack. "I must pull myself together first, for I am a perfect wreck. I think I shall go abroad for a few months. There is one thing I have done, Jack: I have paid all those old debts. I could not rest until I had done it. I made a pilgrimage to Lisgard. I felt like a murderer when I stood by the grave; but there, we must reap as we sow, and mine has been a harvest of tares."

This was the last they heard of him, for a few months later Captain Hamill died of malaria fever in his friend's bungalow. More than once in his intervals of consciousness he spoke of his old chum. "Poor old Keefe," he said once, "I wonder where he is now, and if that woman leaves him in peace." And another time, "He has been sorely handicapped, but he will keep straight now, when he paid those debts. I had hopes of him; I should like

to have told him so, but it is too late now." It was too late indeed, for the next evening they were burying poor Jack Hamill by moonlight, and, in the absence of the chaplain, Major Ford read the service over the grave.

Lilian's voice died away into silence, and Eunice, who had followed the long narrative with fixed and painful attention, looked at her questioningly.

"And that is all Major Ford can tell us?"

"It is all he knows himself. You see, Eunice, Captain Hamill was the connecting link, and of course that is broken now; Major Ford had no idea that Mr. Desmond's wretched wife was dead. He thinks it very likely that during his wanderings abroad the idea came to him to become an artist. He was always clever with his pencil, he told Douglas, and very probably he went to Paris for a time. At the Dene that evening he had been very reticent and unapproachable, and had given Major Ford no opening. After his one allusion to Jack Hamill he never mentioned him again; and his manner was so constrained and uneasy when they were left alone after dinner, that Major Ford thought it better to adjourn to the drawing-room. It is a miserable business, is it not, Eunice?"

"Yes, indeed," and then Eunice frowned and hesitated. "Do you know, I think rather better of Mr. Desmond now I hear that he paid back that money and went to his father's grave; it looks as though he were really penitent. Indeed, I feel quite sorry for him."

"That is how I feel; but I am afraid that Major Ford does not trust him. He still thinks that he is an undesirable acquaintance, and that Miss Jem ought to be warned. I was coming over to the Dene to tell her the whole story, exactly as I have told it to you; but the doctor says it is rather a bad sprain, and that I shall not be able to move for ten days or so; and now, what is to be done, Eunice?"

"I don't know." But Eunice knew very well what was in Lilian's mind, and why she had sent for her.

"Dear Eunice, there is only one thing to be done," returned her friend quietly, "and Douglas agrees with me—men are rather cowards in these matters, and my naughty boy flatly refuses to talk to Miss Jem; he says it will be far better for you to do it, and he advises you to lose no time."

"Oh, Lilian, I knew you were going to say this; but if you could guess how I hate the thought of it!" and Eunice looked quite distressed.

"Dear, I do know, and I would gladly have spared you the ordeal; but, indeed, there is no help for it. Things have gone on far too long already. Miss Jem must have her eyes opened, and you must tell her all you have heard. Promise me you will, Eunice, and that there shall be no unnecessary delay." And Eunice promised with much reluctance and sinking of heart; and then, as Rhoda came in with the tea-tray, the subject dropped.

But it was soon renewed again, and for the rest of the evening they spoke of little else. Lilian only once mentioned Araby, and then her tone was a little disapproving. She thought the journey to London in this severe weather a great mistake, and she owned Douglas agreed with her; but Araby was bent on it. Captain Pater was to give her a fitted travelling-bag as a wedding present, and she wanted Douglas to choose it with her, and also the carpets and curtains for the newly furnished rooms; they were to stay at the "Métropole," and she believed that Araby would insist on going to the theatre.

"She is terribly reckless and imprudent where her health is concerned," went on Lilian, "and yet she knows she ought to avoid over-fatigue. I strongly suspect she has a cold now—she coughed more than once when I saw her last; but she only laughed at me when I hinted at it. Is it not a grievous pity, Eunice, that Araby is so undisciplined? that she cannot deny herself a present pleasure, even if it is to her harm? She has set her heart on this jaunt to London, and none of them could dissuade her.

Mrs. Pater would willingly have given it up, but Arab refused to hear reason." And Lilian sighed in rather an oppressed way.

Eunice could not sleep for hours that night. Keefe Desmond's miserable story haunted her, and as she recalled the sad details she wondered how Miss Jem would take it. It may be, too, that other thoughts kept her restless; it was the first time she had slept at Monkbarn, and very probably she would never sleep under its roof again, for the old order changes, and when Araby was mistress Monkbarn would be a very different place to her.

It had been arranged between them that she should return to Shepperton directly after luncheon. Lilian would willingly have kept her another night, but her sense of duty was too strong.

"No, no," she returned in answer to Eunice's eager pleadings to be allowed to remain; "if any harm came through our procrastination, we should never forgive ourselves; delays are always dangerous. You had better get it off your mind, Eunice, and I shall do very well alone; but you must write to me, dear, very fully, and tell me everything." And this Eunice faithfully promised to do.

They spent the morning happily together, and by half-past three Eunice found herself back at the Dene. Rachel, who was at the door to receive her, told her that her mistress and Mr. Desmond were in the drawing-room, and that Billy was in the morning-room. Eunice tried to hide her dismay. "Very well, Rachel, I think I will go upstairs first; they will have heard the carriage drive up, and Miss Durnford will send for me if she wants me." Eunice felt that she dare not face Mr. Desmond. She waited upstairs as long as she dared, and then she went to the morning-room, where she found Billy having his tea.

"Has Mr. Desmond gone, Susan?" she asked rather anxiously.

"Oh dear yes, miss, quite half an hour ago; the carriage was hardly down the drive when he came to wish Billy good-night. He seemed in a mighty hurry, to be sure."

"That looks as though he wanted to avoid me," thought the girl, as she went in search of Miss Jem.

Rachel was setting the tea-table, but the lamps were still unlighted. Miss Jem was in her usual seat by the fire. She looked flushed, and her eyes were very bright. Eunice thought her manner a little strange; she seemed to rouse herself with difficulty to greet her young companion.

"I would have come to you at once, dear Miss Jem, only Rachel told me Mr. Desmond was here, and so I thought I would unpack my bag."

"Oh, he has been gone quite a long while," returned Miss Jem hurriedly. "Well, how is Lilian? I made up my mind that she would be wanting to keep you another night, and that you would be sending me a note to say so." Then Eunice gave a full and particular account of the accident.

"Well, now, it does seem as though the old Friars had a hand in it," ejaculated Miss Jem; "a sprain is a nasty thing, as Dr. Ramsay says, and if she does not get better I shall just drive over to see her. Perhaps you will pour out the tea to-night, Eunice, for I am a bit lazy, and not inclined to move."

"Are you sure you are quite well, dear?" asked Eunice anxiously, for it seemed to her that Jem did not look like herself at all.

"Why, good gracious, child, nothing ever ails me! Whatever should put that in your head?" and there was a trace of peevishness in Jem's voice. "You go on telling me about Lilian;" but as Eunice talked, Jem looked absently in the fire as though her thoughts were far away.

As Eunice dressed herself for dinner that evening she resolved that she would not sleep until she had told the whole story; the evenings were always free from inter-

ruptions, and she could be sure of a quiet, undisturbed hour or two. Eunice was so full of her purpose that she hardly noticed Jem's silence and absence of mind during dinner. She talked only by fits and starts, and hardly seemed to listen to Eunice's answers; and on their return to the drawing-room, she said a little nervously, "Don't you be troubling about me this evening, Eunice; I have got some business to think over, and I don't feel up to bezique or reading aloud, so you can take your book and amuse yourself." And Jem was hurrying off, but Eunice detained her.

"Dear Miss Jem," she said gently, "there is something that Lilian wants me to tell you; she was coming over herself to talk to you, only that horrid sprain prevented her. It is about Mr. Desmond. Major Ford knows all about him, and he told Mr. Hilton." Then Jem turned suddenly pale, and sat down in her easy-chair.

"Oh, lor'," she gasped, "whatever can the Major have to say! Now mind, Eunice, you tell me every word. I won't have a thing left out. You are all against the poor fellow—I don't believe he has got a friend in the world but me; but I am not going to turn against him for a dozen Majors," and Jem's blue eyes flashed with unmistakable anger. But Eunice, nothing daunted, began her story. She must do her part, though results were not in her hands.

CHAPTER XXX

"WHAT WOULD LILIAN SAY?"

Men dare not open their hearts to us if we are to broil them on a thorn-fire.—RUSKIN.

A lamp in the house will often do us more good than a star in the sky.—O. S. MARDEN.

AT first many a horrified ejaculation had interrupted Eunice's narrative, but after a time Jem listened more quietly, and before half the story was told the tears were streaming down her cheeks; once Eunice heard her sob, and would have stopped, but she motioned her to go on.

When she had ended the story, Jem had dried her eyes, and was looking at her in a strange, fixed way.

"Is that all, Eunice?"

"Yes, every word. I do not think I have missed anything, dear Miss Jem; it is a sad, miserable story, and we are all so sorry for Mr. Desmond, but——"

"Wait a bit," returned Jem in a queer, dazed voice; "I don't feel like talking to-night. You have had your say, Eunice, and the Major has had his, and now I will see what the poor fellow has got to say for himself. I will write a note this very minute, and Andrew shall take it round to Honey Hanger in the morning. I don't doubt he will tell me the truth, for we are the best of friends—him and me. I will see him alone to-morrow afternoon, and you will take Billy off my hands, Eunice, and until then I would rather not say another word."

Eunice glanced at her in dismay; it was evident to her that Jem was profoundly agitated and very unhappy.

There was a scared look in her eyes, as though she had received a shock, but she was in no mood for her young companion's sympathy. Never had Jem spoken with such decision and dignity. "I may as well bid you good-night," she said, rising from her chair, "for it is half-past ten now, and I have that letter to write." But Eunice still lingered.

"Dear Miss Jem," she said timidly, "I do hope I have not vexed you;" then a faint smile crossed Jem's lips.

"Now don't you be taking notions in your head," she said kindly; "for things are bad enough without that, and it is no fault of yours that I am troubled. Go to sleep like a good girl, and put it all out of your head, and I will think over things by myself." And then Eunice withdrew somewhat comforted, leaving Jem to her anxious vigil; but it was not long before Eunice heard her come up to her room. Billy's cot was still there. Jem could not bring herself to part with him; that night she stood for a long time looking at him, and thinking of the guilty woman who had abandoned her own flesh and blood; "to think she could be Billy's mother, and leave him, the darling." And Jem checked another sob as she kissed the fair curls, for her very heart was wrung within her. "How could he help doing wrong," she said to herself, "when that fiend of a woman tempted him?" And then she knelt down and prayed simple, tender prayers for the poor prodigal, who had wandered so long in a far country, and had wasted his substance, and who had no father to speak words of forgiveness and blessing when he came back weary and repentant.

"It is easy to see that he cannot forgive himself," thought Jem, "and that is what makes him so hard and bitter." And Jem wept again as she thought of the unhappy man standing beside his father's grave in Lisgard churchyard.

"We must reap as we sow," Keefe had written bitterly to his friend Jack Hamill, and he was right; for the ways of transgressors are hard, and the upward path

of repentance is thorny, and paved with cruel flints which wound the feet of the weary pilgrim.

Jem's eyes looked heavy the next morning, as though she had not slept, but she made no complaint; she was very silent. When she addressed Eunice her manner was as kind as ever, but she was evidently much depressed.

Eunice wrote a short note to Lilian; there was little to tell her.

"Miss Jem is very much shocked, and looks so unhappy," she wrote; "but she will not allow me to speak to her. She has sent for Mr. Desmond, and means to question him about everything. Oh, Lilian, if he were to talk her over! I don't think I ever felt so troubled about anything. I am too young to be any real use, but it seems to me as though no one has influence with her. I will write to you again when I know more, and you must be patient and not worry; and, dear, will you tell your brother that I did my very best?"

Eunice posted her letter when she went out with the dogs; the rest of the morning she spent with Billy. Directly after luncheon Jem went into the drawing-room, but Eunice dared not follow her. Jem had scarcely taken any food, and she was so restless and nervous that the girl hardly ventured to address her. "She looks downright ill, but there is no use taking any notice," thought Eunice. And then she saw Mr. Desmond walking quickly up the drive, and she hastily withdrew from the window.

Never had an afternoon seemed so long to Eunice, never had childish games been more wearisome. She had built brick castles by the score, had marshalled whole regiments of tin soldiers against imaginary enemies, had fired off toy cannons; but still no one came near them. Susan was out that afternoon, so Eunice gave Billy his tea, and when he grew weary of play she rang for Dorcas to put him to bed. As she did so she glanced at the clock—it was a quarter to six; Mr. Desmond had been with Miss Jem for three hours. The next moment the

drawing-room door opened, and an instant later she could hear his footsteps going down the drive. Eunice could hardly wait while Dorcas collected the toys and carried off Billy, who had turned fretful with fatigue; then she hurried through the hall. Rachel was just bringing out the tea-tray, but Jem had desired her not to light the lamps; she was sitting just as Eunice had found her the previous evening. She looked very pale, and her eyes showed traces of tears. She greeted Eunice with a tremulous smile.

"You must have thought I had forgotten you, my dear," she said kindly, "never to have come near you all these hours; but I was bound to have it out with him if we had talked till midnight."

"Oh yes, I can understand that!" Eunice had knelt down beside her, and was looking at her anxiously. "Dear Miss Jem, will you tell me what Mr. Desmond said?" Then a sudden flush crossed Jem's face.

"We went over the whole story bit by bit," she returned slowly, "and he did not deny a thing. It was all true, what the Major said, but it sounded, oh! so different as Mr. Desmond told it. It turned me sick to hear what he and Billy had been through. Oh, those wicked, wicked women, for that Bella was every bit as bad as her sister; they nearly broke his heart between them with the shame of their doings."

"Poor man!" observed Eunice with genuine feeling; then Jem patted her hand approvingly. "Ay, you may well be sorry for him, but his worst trouble was that his father would not know that he had paid those debts. 'All my life long I shall never forgive myself,' he said; 'he was the best and the dearest father that any man could have, and I have brought down his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.' Oh, it was dreadful to hear him, Eunice! he just sobbed like a child, and I cried to hear him."

"Did he tell you about his wife's death?"

"Yes, he has told me everything; there is nothing that

he has kept from me. She has been dead about a year and a half, only the news never reached him for six months. Bella wrote to him from New York. It was an accident; they had gone for a pleasure-trip on a steamer, Nona and Bella and her husband, and another steamer ran into them. I forget how it happened exactly, but it was like that horrible affair of the *Princess Alice* that happened a good many years ago. The poor creatures were all in the water together; Bella was picked up later, but not before she had seen her husband and Nona drowned before her eyes; they were clinging together, and Nona dragged him down. A fog came on, and there were very few saved. It was one of the most terrible accidents that ever happened, for there had been nothing to warn the poor creatures of their danger. When the collision took place some of them were dancing on the deck."

"Good heavens, how horrible!"

"Yes indeed, poor souls—dancing one moment and the next launched into eternity. No wonder that Mr. Desmond said that it haunted him for months; badly as Nona had treated him, he could not forget that he had once loved her, and that she was Billy's mother; but it would not have been in human nature not to be thankful for his freedom. Eunice, I want you not to be hard on him any longer, for if ever a man has repented he has; he has kept himself straight for years, and worked hard, and though he is poor he is able to pay his way. He lives quietly, but his lonely life does not suit him, and he owned to me that his nerves and temper often got the better of him.

"It nearly broke my heart to hear him say that no one had ever given him a helping hand or a kind word till he came to Shepperton, and that since Major Hamill died he had not a friend in the world. Eunice," and here Jem's voice faltered a little, "there is no need for him to say that any longer, for I am going to marry him and take care of him and Billy. My dear," went on Jem

solemnly, "if the angels rejoice over a repentant sinner, as our Bible tells us, surely the woman who loves him will never cast up his sins against him."

"Miss Jem, oh, my dear Miss Jem!" but Eunice was too agitated and shocked to say more; the next moment, to Jem's dismay, she had buried her face in her friend's lap, and was crying as though her heart would break.

No, she could not bear it! It was too dreadful, and what would Lilian say? She had grown so to love this simple, kindly creature, and now she was to lose her too; was life to be nothing but loss and disappointment? Poor Eunice's tears were for herself as well as for Jem; with youthful sophistry and impatience she was asking why such troubles were to come to her? "I wanted to be with her always, and to be a comfort to her," thought the poor girl, shedding bitter tears of disillusion.

Jem stroked her hair with a trembling hand. "Don't, for pity's sake, cry like that, Eunice," she said imploringly, "for I have gone through enough since last night, and I feel as weak as a child." Then Eunice tried vainly to control herself.

"I am so sorry," she sobbed; "dear Miss Jem, I know I am behaving very badly, but I have been so anxious and miserable all these hours. I wanted so much for you to be happy, and now, oh dear! oh dear! what will become of you? and then I must lose you, and I have grown to love you so." And Eunice could say no more.

A very sweet expression came to Jem's face. "Don't be sorry for yourself or me either," she said very gently. "You and me are not going to part, Eunice, for I am a deal too fond of you for that, and I was telling Keefe so this evening"—here she felt the girl shiver. "Why should I not call him Keefe," she went on, "when I am going to be his wife? I care that for him, that I would sooner stand beside him, though all the world were against him and me, than marry the best man you could pick out. Keefe knows I love him, and that there is nothing that

I would not do for him. Why should I be ashamed to own it? I am not a girl in my teens, and I have had lovers in plenty—they were more in love with my money than me; but Keefe, with all his faults, isn't as bad as that," and Jem smiled happily.

"Do you mean that he really loves you?" asked Eunice, rather taken aback at this, but she blushed afterwards at her own audacity. But Jem was too simple to resent it.

"I don't mean he has fallen in love with me—no one could expect that," returned Jem with frank humility. "It is not likely that such a homely little body would attract a man like Keefe; but he is that grateful that he has grown to care for me. 'I am fond of you, Jem,' those were his very words; 'you are my only friend, and the best and dearest woman in the world; and if you can put up with a fellow like me, I swear you shall never repent it.'" And then Jem's face grew very tender as she remembered the look on Keefe's face.

"And you are sure that he was not thinking of your money, dear?" Then a queer, half-ashamed expression came into Jem's eyes.

"I suppose Douglas or Lilian put that into your head. Well, I am going to tell you the truth, Eunice, but you must be keeping it to yourself. I told you that Keefe hides nothing from me. Well, he said he was that lonely and miserable at Honey Hanger, and so fretted with the child and the difficulty of selling his pictures, that the devil put it into his head that it would be a fine thing to marry a rich woman like me, and have a good home for himself and Billy, and he set about making himself pleasant to me. This went on until Billy was brought here, and then he felt fairly ashamed of himself."

"But he was trying to get you all the time, Miss Jem."

"No, my dear, begging your pardon, he was doing nothing of the kind; we were just the best of friends, and he was happier here than he had ever been since he left Lisgard. He liked to come and grumble to me and

tell me his troubles—I suppose I petted him a bit. Now, I don't mind telling you, Eunice, for it will help to clear him, and I am not the least ashamed of it, he never would have asked me to marry him yesterday if he had not seen that I cared for him."

"He asked you yesterday!" with a little gasp.

"Ay, to be sure he did, but I did not give him any answer. I was that flustered that I hardly knew what I was about, and I begged him to go away and leave me to think about it. I was not going to refuse him, I loved him too well for that; but I did not want him to think that I was so ready to take him. And then you came in and told me about the Major's story. I thought I should have fainted as I heard it; there was nothing to do but to send for Keefe and have it all out with him, and you can guess the rest."

"Oh, dear Miss Jem, are you sure that you are not making a mistake, a dreadful mistake?"

"I am sure of nothing, child; I only know that I love Keefe so dearly that I mean to make his life bright if I can. Think what it means to me to have Billy for my own boy; for Keefe says I shall do as I like with him. Folks may tell me that I am an old fool, but what does that matter when I am that proud and happy at the thought of caring for those two that my heart is quite brimming over? God helping me, I mean to make Keefe so happy that he will forget all that dreadful past. Now, I am fairly worn out with talking, and you have never even given me your good wishes." Then Eunice put her arms round Jem's neck and held her fast.

"Dear, dearest Miss Jem! I pray with my whole heart that you may be as happy as you deserve," and her kiss was warmly returned. One other word Miss Jem did say, as they went upstairs together—"Don't you be writing to Lilian about this," she observed quietly, "for I mean to drive over to-morrow and tell her myself." And Eunice was thankful to be spared that letter; her head ached, and her thoughts were in confusion, and she was

glad when Miss Jem proposed to retire early; "for I am that jaded that I can hardly keep my eyes open," observed Jem, who was quite worn out with excitement and her sleepless night. But Eunice's last waking thought was —"What would Lilian say?"

CHAPTER XXXI

"ARMED NEUTRALITY OR PEACE?"

And the sting of settled care
Passed away when she was there,
For my life grew strong and brave
With the courage that she gave,
And the night at last has flown,
Hers the praise, and hers alone.
—LECKY.

THE following morning Miss Jem drove over to Medfield, but she did not invite Eunice to accompany her.

"I don't suppose I shall be back to luncheon," she remarked, as they stood together in the porch waiting for the carriage to come round; "Lilian and me will have plenty to talk about, and there is no need to hurry back. Don't you trouble about Billy, Susan will look after him; it is a grand morning, and you might just have a spin on your bicycle." But Eunice shook her head.

"The roads are still muddy. I think I had better have a good walk instead, and then Tommy can come with me," for Baby was to drive with his mistress.

"Well, you can do as you like," returned Jem cheerfully, "please yourself and you will please me." Then a little hurriedly, "I don't think I told you, Eunice, that we shall have a visitor this evening!" And Jem blushed and looked as conscious as a girl of seventeen.

Eunice started. "Is Mr. Desmond coming to dinner?"

"Why, yes, dear, of course he is! but don't you be thinking that you are in the way or any such nonsense, for we'll begin as we are to go on; and if you are a good girl and treat my friend well, we shall be as comfortable

as possible." And here there was a wistful, appealing look in Jem's blue eyes.

"Dear Miss Jem," kissing her affectionately, "I mean to be as good as possible." And then Jem nodded happily, and jumped into the carriage.

Half-an-hour later Eunice set off for her walk. The recent thaw had made the lanes impassable, but the Medfield Road would be dry and pleasant, she knew, so she decided to turn her footsteps in that direction; but just as she was passing the corner by Chez-Nous she came face to face with Mr. Desmond. He was walking fast with his eyes fixed on the ground, as though he were lost in thought. He did not see Eunice until he was close to her, and then he stopped abruptly.

Eunice stopped too. She felt extremely awkward. The rencontre was as unwelcome as it was unexpected. What was she to say to him? "It is a fine day," she began nervously; "it is quite spring-like. Miss Durnford will enjoy her drive to Medfield."

"Has she gone there?" with an air of surprise. "Oh, to be sure, she told me Miss Hilton had met with an accident. Miss Cleveland, if you are walking farther, may I inflict my company on you? There is something I want to say to you, and the opportunity is too good to be lost."

Eunice was almost too astonished to answer. Mr. Desmond's manner was conciliatory, but a little masterful. Without waiting for her permission, he whistled to Tommy, who was hunting rabbits in the avenue at Chez-Nous, and the next moment they were walking on together.

"There is something you want to say to me?" asked Eunice, as her companion remained silent.

Then Mr. Desmond turned to her with a forced smile —"Yes," he said abruptly, "I want to know exactly how we stand—you and I! Is it to be active warfare, or armed neutrality, or peace?" His deep, musical voice lingered on the last word.

"I do not understand," in a bewildered voice, for she was hardly prepared for such a direct assault.

"Oh yes, you do," in the old cynical tone; "you are far too intelligent a young lady to misunderstand me, Miss Cleveland. Please imagine that we are in the Palace of Truth, and that for five minutes we are to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to each other, without gloss, or sham, or deception. Do you think, under these circumstances, we should arrive at an understanding?"

Eunice shook her head doubtfully, but she was evidently afraid of his next speech.

"Miss Cleveland, you have never liked me," he went on; "from the first you have distrusted and thought the worst of me. I do not say that I have not deserved your harsh judgment, but there have been times when at least you might have given me the benefit of a doubt. The devil, they say, is not as black as he is painted—and even a reprobate like myself may not be past praying for. You know a felon has a ticket-of-leave if he behaves himself for a term of years."

"Mr. Desmond, please do not talk so," and Eunice's cheeks were burning. "Of course, you are angry with me; you know it was I who told Miss Jem the Major's story."

"For which I owe you the deepest gratitude. Good heavens," as Eunice stared at him, unable to believe her ears, "can you not imagine the relief of dropping the mask, of knowing that the very worst of one had been told? I was too great a coward to tell it myself; besides, it was like tearing a bandage off an unhealed wound. A dozen times I have tried to begin when I have been at the Dene, but something put me off; but last night, when I found she knew all, I was ready to bless you for what you had done."

His tone brought the tears to Eunice's eyes. As she looked at him she was convinced that he meant every word he said. The cynical, hard expression had left his face, and the dark eyes were glowing with deep feeling.

At that moment the man's better nature had awakened, and Keefe Desmond looked as his good angel must have loved to see him.

"Mr. Desmond," returned the girl earnestly, "indeed, indeed I do not misjudge you now. I know how hard it has been for you, and I could not help feeling sorry"—then a sudden, uncontrollable impulse came to her—"if I could only be sure that you really cared for my dear Miss Jem—really and truly, I mean."

"You think I am marrying her for her money? Don't look so frightened, we are still in the Palace of Truth."

"I thought that might have something to do with it," stammered Eunice, "because she is not young or good-looking, but, of course, no one could know her without loving her. She is to me the dearest of friends, though I have known her for such a short time. I know all her little ways, and I often laugh at them; and she is so simple and childlike, that she laughs with me. Her heart is so big and loving that I think she only lives to do good to other people. All her friends feel as I do; we could none of us bear to think that she was unhappy."

"There is no need for you to fear that," he returned gravely. "Miss Cleveland, I am glad you have said this to me, for now I can be perfectly frank with you. I have not been a good man, as you know; and there was a time not so long ago when your supposition was correct, and I was tempted by the thought of the money. But now I feel differently. I have had a lonely and miserable life since I was a boy. I have never known what a home means. I have been a wanderer over the face of the earth. Then I came across Miss Durnford," here his voice softened, "and she was good to me—how good you will never know. When no one stood my friend she believed in me, and gave me courage to work on. She brought back my faith in human nature. Think of it quietly and dispassionately, Miss Cleveland. My boy was dying, and she nursed him back to health. All through that weary time of suspense she was my good

angel as well as his; and when I saw her watching beside him, and remembered his mother, I was ready to kiss the ground Miss Jem trod on out of sheer gratitude."

"Yes, yes, I know," for he stopped here to clear his voice.

"You know enough to exonerate me a little, but the rest is between me and her. Miss Durnford knows what I have to offer her, and she is content to take me; and if ever I fail in love and consideration to that dear lady who has promised to be my wife, there will be no punishment too great for me to endure. Come, Miss Cleveland, this is all I mean to say, now or at any future time, for in this world one could not always live in a Palace of Truth. And now shall there be war or peace between us?"

"Peace, most certainly," returned Eunice, holding out her hand. "Thank you, thank you from my heart, for speaking so frankly."

"Nay, the thanks are for your forbearance," returned Mr. Desmond with a pleasant smile. "In reality, I have only been studying to attain my own selfish aims. I was trying to transform a severe critic into a friend, and thereby adding to my daily comfort. One's motives are still a little mixed, you see."

"And I was thinking of Miss Jem," returned Eunice, laughing, and then they parted cordially.

"I never saw the real Keefe Desmond before," she thought to herself as she walked up to the house. "If he is always like this I shall begin to like him. He does not pretend to be in love with her; but all the same he cares for her very much, and he means to be good to her." And Eunice's heart felt lighter as she ate her solitary luncheon, for it seemed to her that the dark cloud was already showing a silver lining.

It was quite dark before the carriage wheels were heard on the drive. Rachel had just drawn the curtains and lighted the lamps when Jem entered. She looked tired and a little subdued, and accepted Eunice's attention quite gratefully.

Her first question was as usual about Billy. It struck the girl that there was a new tenderness in her voice as she mentioned his name.

"I was thinking about him all the way home," she went on. "You see, he belongs to me now. It is almost too grand to be true," and Jem gave a soft, satisfied laugh. "But you will be wanting to hear about Lilian. There's a scrap of a note she wrote while I was putting on my bonnet; you will find it in the pocket of my sealskin;" but Eunice kept it in her hand without reading it.

"Is her foot better, Miss Jem?"

"Oh, it is going on as well as she can expect, but the doctor won't hear of her walking for three or four days. It is very trying for her, poor dear, and if Douglas hadn't been coming back to-morrow I would have offered for you to stay with her for a night or two, but she will want him to herself now."

"Yes, of course," rather hurriedly. "Did you and Lilian have a nice time together?"

Then Jem's face clouded a little.

"Well, I don't think we either of us enjoyed it as much as usual. Lilian is a dear little soul, and she means well; and then, we were too good friends to quarrel, but she would have her say, and it stands to reason that I must have mine. She said she could not bear to vex me, but it was no use pretending that she was glad; that my engagement would be a real trouble to her and Douglas, for she knew how he would feel about it.

"She upset me quite as badly as you did," continued Jem, with tears in her eyes, "and so I told her; and then we cried a bit, and after that we were more comfortable. But she made me laugh once—that she did—for what do you suppose she said, Eunice? 'Whatever are we to do when you are married, and we can't call you Miss Jem any longer? Mrs. Jem won't sound half so well.' Oh dear, I thought we would never have stopped laughing! Now I must go to Billy, and we will finish our talk another time."

Eunice read her little note as soon as she was left alone. It was very short:—

"Dear," it began, "we shall have to put up with it, for there is nothing else to be done; but if you knew how I dread to tell Douglas, he will be so angry! Poor dear Miss Jem! she is perfectly infatuated. It quite frightens me to see how she loves that man. If he were only worthy of such devotion; but we can do nothing more for her. She must dree her weird, and we must make the best of it.—With loving sympathy,

"LILIAN."

"How like Lilian!" thought Eunice as she read the last sentence; "she always makes the best of everything, and she wants me to do the same;" and then a kindly instinct prompted her to follow Miss Jem into her room.

"Dear," she said coaxingly, "I wish you would let me help you dress to-night and send Susan away. You have no idea how nice you will look;" and though Miss Jem seemed surprised at this attention, she consented with her usual good-nature; though her face fell when she saw Eunice's choice of gowns.

"That old thing!" she said contemptuously; "why, I got it five years ago, and it is not a bit up-to-date."

"What does that matter?" returned Eunice; "it is a lovely dress and quite as good as new, and you always look so nice in it." And she was right, the dark sapphire velvet exactly suited Jem; and as Eunice would only allow her to wear a small diamond pendant, the result was so satisfactory that Keefe Desmond's first words were distinctly approving.

"I am glad I took your advice, Eunice," observed Miss Jem in a gratified tone, when the evening was over. "Keefe is very particular about ladies' dress, and he told me that I looked just as he liked to see me; so as he does not care for smart gowns," with a sigh, "I must try and dress a bit quieter, and you will help me, won't you, my dear?"

"Didn't you think I was a good girl this evening, Miss Jem?" Then Jem fairly beamed at her.

"You were just sweet," she returned emphatically, "and I could see Keefe was as pleased as possible;" for Eunice had been on her best behaviour: when Miss Jem had suggested music, she had placed herself at the piano and played piece after piece, and had then taken her book into the inner drawing-room. "I suppose Lilian would call this making the best of it," she thought more than once that evening. Jem was very happy—touchingly so, Eunice thought; and not even her friends' disapproval and want of sympathy could damp her.

"They will come round in time," she said once to Eunice; "and, after all, it is no one's business but my own, and I suppose I am old enough to know what's for my own happiness. Susan vexes me the most, for she goes about as though she were a walking funeral, till I lose all patience with her." But Susan unburdened her mind to Eunice.

"It is not that I mind her being married," she said gloomily, "though at her age I think it would have been wiser to remain single—but there, I am not finding fault with her about that, poor lamb. But Mr. Desmond is not the right man for her, missy. There is a deal of talk about him in the place, and Compton says that he has been no better than he should be, and that he has been a play-actor and goodness knows what besides. They say he has scarcely enough to live on, and that that is why he is taking up with the mistress. I doubt but he is after her money, Miss Eunice; for it stands to reason that a fine handsome man like Mr. Desmond would hardly fall in love with a homely little body like our Miss Jem—though she is as good as gold, bless her!" and the faithful creature wiped her eyes.

"Dear Susan," returned Eunice, taking the hard hand in hers, "you must try not to look at the dark side of things, for they may be better than you fancy. Mr. Desmond is poor, but that is no disgrace, surely; and

Compton ought to know better than to gossip and tell tales about the gentleman whom his mistress is to marry. There is one thing I can say for your comfort, that Mr. Desmond is truly attached to Miss Jem, and you can see for yourself how happy he makes her;" but Susan shook her head mournfully.

"Ay, she is happy enough now; but in my opinion, missy, the affection is more on her side than his. It is not the right thing to worship a man in the way she does; she might be a young thing of seventeen, to see how she dotes on him. It scares me, Miss Eunice, that it does, for if anything were to come between them it would just break her heart."

"Oh, Susan, I wish you would not talk so—but of course nothing will come between them."

"I hope not, missy," but Susan still spoke lugubriously; "for, mark my words, it would go hard with Miss Jem. She has been lonely enough since the master died; and those who wanted her were not to her taste, and she sent them about their business.

"'If I ever care for a man, Susan,' she once said to me, 'I would marry him if he had only one coat to his back—yes, I would, if all the world were against me.' Isn't that just what she is doing, Miss Eunice? for isn't he as poor as poor can be, and there's no one to say a good word for him? There's Miss Lilian, and Mr. Hilton, and the Paters, they are all against the match, and she has to pretend she does not mind; but she cries about it, missy, when we are alone together. 'Why won't they let me be happy, Susan?'—why, she said that to me last night, when Mrs. Pater had been fretting her. 'They all think I am an old fool, Sukey dear, but I am only thirty-nine; that is not a great age, if only he were not ten or eleven years younger,' and she sighed in quite an oppressed way, so that I could not bear to hear her, and I was weak enough to tell her that she looked younger every day, and so she does, missy;" and Eunice agreed with her.

CHAPTER XXXII

WHAT THE WORLD SAID ABOUT IT

The world has nothing to bestow;
From our own selves our joys must flow.
—COTTON.

We try to grasp too much of life at one time.—O. S. MARDEN.

MISS DURNFORD'S engagement was a nine days' wonder in Disborough and Shepperton, and was discussed freely by all sorts and conditions of men. In the close, and among her acquaintances in the town, there was much head-shaking, and many expressions of horrified amazement and polite incredulity. "That little old maid! why, she must be forty if she is a day," observed one acrimonious spinster of uncertain age and rigid virtue; "but of course the man is marrying her for her money." Indeed, the "Durnford Soap Alliance," as one young wag dubbed it, was the topic of the day at every tea-table in the place.

At the "Green Man," and the "Fox and Hounds," and even at the humbler "Blue Boar," the match was just as freely discussed by the honest waggoners and day-labourers who dropped in for a tankard of ale, for every one knew Miss Durnford, and there were few of the cottagers round Shepperton who had not received a kindness at her hands.

"I have just heard a queer sort of tale," remarked Jabez Noakes, a pedlar who drove a brisk trade in the surrounding villages, and who was a purveyor of gossip as well as cutlery and ribbons. "They say the missus up at the Dene is going to wed with Betty Prior's lodger."

"Ay, thou art right, chap," returned the miller's man, putting down his tankard. "I was up at the Dene myself

an hour ago, and Mrs. Compton was in a rare taking about it. She was as red as a turkey-cock when I told her what folks were saying, but she did not give me the lie, though."

"It was old Bet herself told me," continued Jabez. "She was all of a cackle, like a hen that has laid an egg. 'He is a proper chap, Jabez,' says she, 'and quite the gentleman, and pays me regular, he does; and it stands to reason that a homely body like Miss Durnford would be glad of a handsome husband, and if he has feathered his nest finely, it is give and take, as I say; and she is old enough to know her own business.' Oh, she was fine and pleased, was old Bet. You see, it is a grand lift for her that her lodger should wed a rich lady like Miss Durnford. Here's to their health and happiness," and Jabez drained his tankard.

It was quite ten days before Douglas Hilton appeared at the Dene, and then Lilian was with him. She still limped a little, and looked rather pale from her enforced confinement, but otherwise she seemed well.

Douglas was rather glum and silent. His good wishes were given in a formal, perfunctory manner. His solemnity and evident constraint put Jem rather out of countenance, and but for Lilian's efforts the visit would have been most uncomfortable.

"You don't mean to say you are going already?" observed Jem in a loud voice, when, after half-an-hour had passed, Lilian rose in response to her brother's meaning look. "I call that downright shabby."

"We cannot stay longer to-day," returned Lilian, colouring, "for we are to have luncheon at Chez-Nous. We will come again, dear Miss Jem." But Jem, who was sorely affronted, only tossed her head.

"You see them off, Eunice," she said, with a comical little attempt to play the fine lady; but Douglas remained behind for a moment.

"He is making his peace with her," whispered Lilian, as they went out into the hall. "Poor dear boy! he

never could hide his feelings, and he is so upset about this unlucky engagement. He thinks Miss Jem is dooming herself to certain misery. It makes me quite unhappy to hear him. Ah, there he comes," as Douglas appeared, looking rather red and disturbed.

"This is a sad business," he said, as he shook hands with Eunice, "but I suppose Lilian is right, and we must just make the best of it."

"I think it would be wiser," returned Eunice in a low voice; "and she is very happy." Then he looked at her rather keenly, but said no more.

"Douglas was in his airs," observed Jem when Eunice re-entered the room. "I was downright angry with him, that I was, for it is no business of his who I choose to marry. He is making a poor sort of match himself, as I could tell him—a sickly bit of goods like that Araby Pater, who doesn't look as though she were long for this world,—and yet the tiresome fellow is actually finding fault with me."

"But, dear Miss Jem, I am sure Mr. Hilton said something nice to you when he stayed behind."

"Oh, he didn't say much," returned Jem rather crossly. "He just took my hands and looked at me as solemn as an owl. 'You do know that I wish you happiness from the bottom of my heart, Miss Jem,' says he, 'but I cannot tell a falsehood—besides, you would find me out—and I am very sorry about this.' There's a nice sort of way to congratulate an old friend," and there were tears of vexation in Jem's eyes.

Mrs. Pater's behaviour surprised Eunice most. A few days after their return from London, Miss Jem had sent her to Chez-Nous to inquire after Araby, who had been confined to her bed with a severe cold.

She was shown into Mrs. Pater's morning-room, where she found that lady, as usual, writing voluminous Indian letters—indeed, she had correspondents in all parts of the globe. She received Eunice with such a portentous air of gravity that the girl was quite alarmed.

"I hope Araby is not worse, Mrs. Pater—that there is nothing serious," she stammered.

"Oh no, I hope not," was the reply. "Of course, Araby's colds ought not to be trifled with, but the doctor says she will be able to leave her room in a day or two. I won't ask you to go up, Miss Cleveland, for talking makes her cough worse. It is all her own fault," she went on; "for she would go to the theatre, and it was such a terribly cold evening. I wanted to stay behind myself, and so did Ian, but Arab was wild to go, so we all went. Well, she has been nicely punished, silly girl, for she has been in bed ever since, and she hardly sleeps all night for her cough. Douglas is so vexed about it," she continued. "He is too chivalrous to say a word of blame, but I can see by his manner that he is dreadfully put out. It is a grievous pity that Arab is so self-willed and childish, for she cannot expect a sensible man like Douglas Hilton to be pleased with such whims and caprices."

"I am very sorry," replied Eunice; but Mrs. Pater interrupted her.

"Oh, it is no good discussing Araby; one might as well try to walk on quicksands. What a perplexing world this is, Miss Cleveland! 'We are all mad, my masters,' as Shakespeare says. To think that Miss Jem, of all people, is going to make such a fool of herself!"

"Oh, I hope not."

"It turned me quite sick when Douglas told me," went on Mrs. Pater. "Cecil was so sorry about it. He left us this morning, but he felt he could not call at the Dene to say good-bye. He has given me a message for Miss Jem. He says he might just as well have held his tongue for all the good he has done."

"Oh no, Major Ford was quite right to speak."

"So I told him," sighed Mrs. Pater. "Well, I would not have believed how much I should feel it," and there was real regret in her voice. "Perhaps you think, Miss Cleveland, that because I have teased Miss Jem and

sharpened my wits upon her rather mercilessly, I am not fond of her; but you are quite mistaken. There are few people I like better, in spite of her oddities. I quite love her—and to think that she is going to throw herself away on that man! Oh dear, oh dear! I have not patience to talk of it; and if ever there was a saint I am sure Miss Jem is one;" but here Mrs. Tina began to laugh in rather a hysterical way.

"Oh, I know you think I am half crazy," she went on, wiping her eyes, "but it just came into my head how I vexed her once. You know what a tongue I have. She was showing me some dresses she had brought from London. She is terribly fond of fine clothes. Well, I was a trifle bored, and perhaps I was envious, for she had got some really nice things. Anyhow, I thought I would give her a bit of a lesson, so I looked at her rather sadly. 'Yes, they are just beautiful, my dear,' I said, 'and you are a lucky woman to have Fortunatus' purse; but what a pity it is that one never hears of a dressy saint! I suppose pious people have to starve their vanity, and that when one renounces the world, the flesh, and the devil, the silks and the velvets somehow come into the category.' Oh dear, poor Miss Jem! She got as red as a beetroot. 'I don't think I will show you anything more,' she said in a flat sort of voice. 'But there is a lot about dress in the Bible, Mrs. Pater, and I don't think you need to have been so hard on me.' But I was not a bit penitent."

"And yet you call her a saint."

"Well, she is a good soul anyhow, though she does set my nerves on edge a bit. Now, will you tell Miss Jem that I mean to come round this evening?—and give her my best love."

Eunice heard the particulars of the interview afterwards.

"Well, now, you need not have been anxious," observed Jem in a gratified voice, "for Mrs. Tina was as nice as possible. Indeed, I never knew her so affectionate. She said I was taking all my friends by surprise, and though

there was not one of them who really approved of the match, yet they all hoped it would turn out better than they expected; and then she said all manner of kind things. I wish they were not all so against my marrying Keefe; but, as I told her, when they knew. him better they would change their minds, and I could wait till then. And so I can," went on Jem with a happy smile; "for I know he will win them over in time, and then they will forget that they have thought so hardly of him." And Jem spoke with such tender loyalty and womanly patience that Eunice felt quite touched.

Jem was supremely happy, and even her friends' want of sympathy and the silent opposition of her household could not damp her for long. When Mrs. Compton had been unusually trying, and had expressed disapproval in every look and word, Jem would come back to the morning-room looking a little subdued, but the cloud soon passed.

"We must not expect everything to go smooth in this world," she would say. "I never picked a rose in the hedge yet without running a thorn into my finger. Bless you, child, they will all come round in time, and black looks and short answers don't do much harm after all," for Jem's cheerful philosophy seldom failed.

It was quite pathetic to see her with Billy. The child was too young to be taken into confidence, but Jem had told him that the Dene was to be his home.

"You are my boy now," she once said to him. "Dad has given you to me. You will never go away and leave me, will you, Billy?"

"I will never leave my Jemmy," returned Billy solemnly, with one of his strangling hugs, "and I will stop here for ever and ever." And then, as a sudden thought crossed his childish mind, "But won't dad be dull—couldn't he be here too?"

"Oh, we will see about that," returned Jem hastily. "But I don't think he is really dull. We see him every day, don't we, darling?"

"Yes, and dad plays with me now," observed Billy thoughtfully, as he rested his fair little head against Jem's shoulder. "When we lived with Betty, dad always said his head ached when I wanted him to play, and if I made a noise with my gee-gees he had a big frown here," touching his forehead; "but my Jemmy never frowns." Then Jem rested her cheek against his curls in silent rapture. The mother-want in her nature seemed stilled and satisfied.

"Isn't it just sweet to have a child to love?" she said once to Eunice. "If Billy were my own I don't believe I could care for him more."

In Eunice's opinion Jem was showing very good sense in her behaviour to her lover. Mr. Desmond's daily visits were always paid between afternoon tea and dinner, and on these occasions Eunice always carefully effaced herself; but he very rarely dined with them, and only by special invitation. Sometimes he would drive out with her and Billy, or on fine mornings he would take them for a walk.

"I think he really behaves very well under the circumstances," Eunice once remarked to Lilian, "and shows a great deal of tact and good taste. I thought Miss Jem would always be wanting him to spend the evening here, but she very seldom asks him. She says it is much nicer to have him to herself for an hour or so, and that she always feels nervous when he dines here. You see, the servants make her uncomfortable, they are all against him, and really it is a little trying for her; only she bears it like an angel."

Lilian came frequently to the Dene now, and she and Eunice had many confidential talks together.

Lilian told her that her brother's marriage was fixed for the fourteenth of June, and that Mrs. Pater and Araby were going to town for a fortnight to order the trousseau.

"Araby is rather put out," she went on, "because Douglas tells her that he will not be able to run up for

a day or so; but he is really busy, and it is rather unreasonable of her to expect it. She never seems to understand that a man has his work to do even if he is engaged, and it does so vex Douglas when she treats him with coldness and indifference."

Eunice winced. These little revelations always pained her; she never knew what to say in answer. When Araby came to wish them good-bye before she left for London, both Eunice and Miss Jem were struck by the fragility and delicacy of her looks. She was certainly thinner, and had not lost her cough. Eunice thought she looked far from happy.

"So you are going to do your shopping, Araby," observed Miss Jem cheerfully. "Well, by and by Eunice and I will be doing ours," for Jem had already made her arrangements. She and Keefe Desmond had talked things over, and the wedding was not to be until August. They were to be married quietly in London, and come back to the Dene in September, and Eunice was to take Billy to the End House during their absence.

Araby looked at Miss Jem with a faint smile of amusement when she spoke of the London shopping.

"Oh," she observed, with a slight curl of her lip, which was not lost on Eunice, "I quite forgot you had a trousseau to get too."

"Yes, I would like my things to be as nice as possible," returned Jem, quite oblivious to the hidden sarcasm of Araby's speech. "Easter comes early this year, so we are going to put off our business until the end of April. It is just the best month for London. I shall go to the 'Langham' this time, and Eunice will stay with her own folk, but she has promised to come to me when I want her."

Araby listened to this with a slightly bored air. Then she turned to Eunice.

"You must promise to come to our wedding," she said pleasantly. "You will bring her, will you not, Miss Jem? for all the world and his wife are coming, I believe.

Douglas just hates the fuss, but I tell him we must do our duty though we die for it."

"Oh, gentlemen never care for a smart wedding," returned Miss Jem humourously; "but you must not give in to him, Araby. Of course I will bring Eunice. I am going to get the prettiest dress and hat I can find for her."

"Miss Jem is far too good to me," observed Eunice, trying to smile; but her face was rather white for a moment, though no one noticed it. How she had dreaded the invitation! But there was no escape now; she would have to go through with it.

Araby took her departure after this. She kissed Eunice rather affectionately, but her eyes looked a little sad.

"Araby seems rather low and out of spirits," observed Eunice, as she watched her walking languidly down the drive. "Lilian says she hates the idea of going to town, because Mr. Hilton cannot get away. But a fortnight is not such a long time, after all."

"Isn't it!" remarked Jem shrewdly. "If you asked Araby she would tell you a different sort of tale. That's the worst of Araby. She never does things by halves. She is that fond of Douglas that she quite mopes if he stays away for a day or two. Lilian was only saying so yesterday. She is never happy unless he is dancing attendance on her. But lor', my dear! Douglas is not that sort of man at all. He knows he has his work to do, and that his men want looking after; and it stands to reason that he is not going to neglect his business because he has got a sweetheart. She is just making herself and him miserable, because she thinks she can't exist for a fortnight without seeing him."

"It is a pity she lets him see it," observed Eunice thoughtfully. "I think it must trouble him."

"Oh, he has troubles enough," returned Miss Jem impatiently. "If you plant a thorn you can't expect it to yield roses, and Araby will give him pricks, for all

her devotion. Douglas has a different nature," went on Jem. "He is quiet and sensible, and he does not understand this sort of stormy courtship. He thinks it ought to be plain sailing and as comfortable as possible, and when Araby gets into these moods he does not know how to deal with her. I can tell by her manner that she is leading him a life, but I don't believe he will give in to her. Where duty's concerned Douglas is as stiff as a poker. There, I mustn't stop talking any longer, for Keefe's coming to take me and Billy out;" and Jem bustled away with a beaming face to tell her boy to get ready.

Eunice stood by the window with her eyes fixed absently on a golden border of crocuses.

"How strange of Araby!" she said to herself. "She has his love, she is going to marry him, and yet she does not look happy; there is a restless, dissatisfied expression in her face. What can she want? She has all that life can offer her, and yet my dear Miss Jem is a hundred times happier than she." And a soft, amused look came into Eunice's eyes a moment later as she saw the trio walk down the drive, Billy holding fast to Jem's hand, and Keefe Desmond bending his handsome head deferentially to listen to Jem's lively chatter.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

Love and Heaven
Are the only gifts not bartered;
They alone are freely given.
—A. A. PROCTER.

To love, is to be all made of faith and service.
—SHAKESPEARE.

ONE evening about a fortnight later Eunice left the house with her faithful satellite Tommy. It was the end of March, but the blustering east winds had vanished, and soft refreshing showers had washed away the dust. It was one of those delicious spring days when the earth seemed reborn, and everywhere there was growth and vigorous young life. There was a faint tinge of green in the hedgerows, and the shining buds of the chestnuts seemed ready to burst into bloom. The almond-trees were in blossom, and in sheltered nooks of the garden Eunice had that morning gathered violets. From the meadows came the bleating of lambs, and the little wilderness beyond the tennis-lawn resounded with the songs of thrushes and blackbirds. Everywhere sunshine and the gladness of spring. Nevertheless, Eunice felt a strange sense of oppression as she walked down the drive.

Mr. Desmond had been having tea at the Dene, and Eunice had offered to do an errand for Miss Jem in Disborough as a pretext for ridding them of her company. As she passed the drawing-room door she could hear Jem's loud, cheerful laugh, a little unrefined, perhaps, but full of heart sunshine, and Keefe Desmond's deep, vibrating voice in answer. Eunice was just unlatching

the gate, when her attention was attracted by a woman who was crossing the road.

She was a tall, largely made woman, with a dark complexion and bold, flashing eyes, and her dress was at once smart and tawdry. For the moment Eunice thought she was a gipsy. To her surprise the woman stopped at the gate and accosted her.

"Is this the place they call the Dene, miss?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes," replied Eunice, wondering at the question.

"Miss Durnford lives here, then? At least, the old woman told me so."

"You are right. This is Miss Durnford's house. May I ask if you have any business with her?"

"No; my business ain't with her," returned the woman shortly. Her manner was somewhat aggressive and disagreeable, and Eunice felt convinced she had been drinking. "But there's a party here of the name of Desmond, who was once an acquaintance of mine. I have been looking for him for a long time, but I only found out his address by accident. The old woman at the cottage told me to come here. He is up at the house, isn't he, miss?"

"Mr. Desmond is here, certainly. But I am not at all sure he will be able to speak to you."

"Oh, he will speak to me fast enough when he knows my name," returned the woman in an insolent voice. "You just tell him that Mrs. O'Rourke wants a word with him—Bella O'Rourke, you had better say."

"Bella!" Eunice started. Could this very unpleasant and most disreputable-looking person be Mr. Desmond's sister-in-law? What evil purpose could have brought her to Shepperton? Very probably she wanted to extort money from him; for her shabby, draggled appearance was sufficient proof that she was not in prosperous circumstances.

"Well, are you going to tell him, miss?" demanded the woman angrily as Eunice hesitated. "But there, I think

I had better be doing my business myself." And the next moment, to Eunice's alarm, she unlatched the gate and flung it back. "I will just ring the door-bell and ask for my gentleman." And she walked boldly up the drive.

"What a dreadful creature! I am sure she is intoxicated," thought Eunice, as she quickly made her way through the stable-yard, and entered by the back door. Mr. Desmond must be prepared for the ordeal that awaited him. This was her one idea. And the next moment she burst into the drawing-room panting and breathless.

"Mr. Desmond," she said, trying to speak coherently, "there is such a strange-looking woman coming up to the house to speak to you. She says her name is O'Rourke—Bella O'Rourke. I could not get rid of her."

"Good heavens! Bella O'Rourke here!" And Keefe Desmond looked pale and disturbed. "Jem, my dear," as Jem looked at him anxiously, "I shall have to see her, or she will be making a scene. How on earth has she found me out? I have had more than one begging-letter, but I have never answered them."

"Don't you be giving her anything," returned Jem sensibly, but she looked rather flurried, "or she will make herself a perfect pest to you. She has no claim on you, Keefe, remember that. I will tell Rachel to show her into the morning-room, and then you and me will go and speak to her." But as Jem was about to ring the bell the door was flung open, and Bella O'Rourke stood on the threshold.

"The porch-door was open, so I made bold to step inside, Miss Durnford," she began in a coarse, carneying voice. "Well, Keefe, old chap, I am fine and pleased to set eyes on you again. My stars, are you too great a swell to shake hands with an old friend?" For Mr. Desmond had folded his arms, and regarded her with a black frown. "Gracious me, to see the airs my lord gives himself!" And here Mrs. O'Rourke's eyes began

to flash ominously. Though not intoxicated, as Eunice had suspected, she had taken enough spirits to inflame a naturally passionate temper.

"You have no business to come to this lady's house," returned Mr. Desmond in a hard voice, "and I advise you to go away at once. You have nothing to say to me that I wish to hear, and I decline any sort of communication with you on any subject."

"Oh, indeed, my fine fellow!" returned Bella, in such a tone of fury that instinctively Jem moved closer to Keefe. "You will have nothing more to do with Bella O'Rourke, won't you? But you'll change your tune presently, when all your grand plans are turned topsy-turvy. You are going to marry an heiress, ain't you, Keefe? I wish you joy of the gentleman, ma'am. He is a beauty, he is. Won't Nona laugh in her sleeve when she hears it! They lock you up for bigamy, don't they——" But Mrs. O'Rourke never finished her sentence, for the next moment Keefe seized her arm so fiercely that she winced with pain.

"Hold your tongue, woman!" he said, almost beside himself with anger. "How dare you insinuate such vile falsehoods? I have no wife; she is dead. I have your letter now in which you told me she was drowned before your eyes."

"Oh, I have told heaps of lies in my time," returned the woman with a sneer. "Let go of my arm, old fellow, for I am flesh-and-blood, and not marble, and your grip's like iron." Then Keefe released her; but his look was so savage that the woman seemed a little cowed.

"You have nothing to gain by murdering me," she observed in a bullying tone. "You just behave yourself and I will tell you the rights of the story. It was my Dan who was drowned; Nona clung on to him and dragged him down, poor chap, and we thought she was dead too; but they brought her round after a time. She was up to her little games just then, and says she to me, 'I owe Keefe a grudge, Bella; it will be rare sport to let

him think he is a widower; and when I come back to London I will just spy on my gentleman,' and so she makes me write that letter. 'Couldn't we send him a lock of my hair?' she says, bursting out laughing. Nona was always one for her joke."

"Good God! to think that such fiends should be allowed to live!" groaned Keefe. His face was ghastly, and his limbs shook as though he had the palsy. "Jem," in a despairing voice, "do you hear what this woman says? that Nona—Nona who has been the curse of my life—is not dead." The dreadful emphasis on the last words made Eunice shiver.

"Yes, dear, I hear," returned Jem; her face was quite grey with the horror of the scene, though she was thinking more of him than of herself. "But she may not be speaking the truth even now."

"Oh, indeed," returned Bella insolently, "so that is your opinion, Miss Durnford! But you had better look out before you take up with a married man. I expect he was ready enough to rid himself of a wife, and did not trouble himself to make inquiries. I have known others like him who would have a wife in England and another in America."

"Jem"—and, stung by this taunt, Keefe turned his white, tortured face to his only friend—"say that you do not believe her; that you know I would never have asked you to marry me if I had not been sure that Nona was dead."

"My dear, need you ask me such a question?" returned Jem lovingly; and she took his hand and kissed it. "Don't I always believe in you, and take your part? You and me are the dearest of friends, Keefe, and always shall be, whatever happens." Then a bitter sob broke from Keefe's lips, and he covered his face with his hands; the tender loyalty of this simple, kindly creature had utterly unmanned him.

The motherly instinct in the heart of all good women moved Jem strongly at that pitiful sound.

"Go," she said, stamping her foot and frowning at Bella. "You have done mischief enough. Do you think I will let you torment him any more? If you do not leave the house at once I will send for my coachman and gardener to remove you by force."

"If you will give me money I will go," returned Bella, with the snarl of a hungry dog. "You pay me handsomely, and I will leave the place and never trouble you again."

"Wait a moment," exclaimed Keefe, as Jem was about to refuse indignantly; he was trying to regain his self-command. "There is one question I must ask first, Where is your sister at the present moment, Mrs. O'Rourke?" Then the woman hesitated and seemed embarrassed.

"Speak," he demanded hoarsely, "is she anywhere in England?"

"No," in a sullen undertone; but Bella dropped her eyelids as she spoke. "I left her in New York."

"And she intends to stay there?"

Bella nodded.

"Very well, you can go now, and do your worst. If you were starving you should not have a penny from me. Leave the house before Miss Durnford rings for the men; and if you show your face again here or at the cottage I will have recourse to the police."

"You might give me a five-pound note, Keefe," in a whining tone; "it would be worth your while." But Keefe's only answer was to put his hand menacingly on the bell. Eunice opened the door, and Bella, coerced at last, marched out of the room, muttering fiercely to herself.

Eunice waited until she saw the woman walking rapidly down the drive; then she went silently away. As she did so Jem crept softly to her lover's side; the next moment she lifted the bowed head to her breast. "Don't you lose courage, Keefe," she whispered as she rested her cheek against it. "Don't fret, darling, we will find

some way out of this, please God; and if it comes to the worst, dear heart, I shall always be true and faithful to you." And the tears rolled down Jem's face as she rocked the stricken man in her arms as though he had been Billy.

It was the most miserable evening that Eunice had ever passed at the Dene. Jem remained with Mr. Desmond in the drawing-room, and Eunice dined in solitary state. Once, when Rachel had retired, Jem came in for some wine and biscuits; but she would not touch anything herself. "It turns me sick only to see food," she said. "I will have a cup of coffee and a sandwich later on. Don't you trouble about me, Eunice, I will come to you when he is gone." And then Jem kissed her and hurried away.

It was nearly ten before Keefe Desmond left the house. Eunice had gone up to her room, and was sitting by her window. At the sound of footsteps she opened it quietly and looked out. Jem was still with him. "I will come with you to the gate," she heard her say, and then they walked out slowly hand in hand. A few minutes later Jem entered the room; she looked very wan and exhausted, and her eyelids were swollen with weeping. But she spoke quite calmly.

"Will you come into my room, Eunice?" she said quietly. "Susan has lighted the fire, as I am a bit chilly; and she is going to bring me a cup of coffee. Billy is fast asleep, and won't wake." And then Eunice followed her. Jem stooped over the cot a moment. "Oh, my Billy, my Billy!" she heard her whisper, and then she drew up an easy-chair, and Eunice knelt down and chafed her cold hands very tenderly.

"Dear Miss Jem, you are like ice; you ought not to have walked to the gate."

"Oh, I was not thinking of myself," returned Jem simply. "He was in such a state of mind that I hardly dare trust him out of my sight. That woman's tale has almost turned him crazy."

"I do not wonder at it. Poor Mr. Desmond! it is almost too cruel to believe."

"That is just what I say, Eunice. I can't make up my mind if that Bella was telling us the truth. There was a cunning, shifty look in her eyes; and if she has told a lie once, she might do so again. Supposing, after all, Nona is dead?"

"But, dear Miss Jem, Mrs. O'Rourke said she had left her in New York. She could have no object for deceiving you in this."

"That is what Keefe says; he does not seem to have a doubt, poor fellow, that that dreadful wife of his is really alive. It makes my flesh creep to hear him; he vows he will divorce her. But I asked him what would be the good of that," continued Jem mournfully; "it would not bring us any nearer, for though I love him better every day I live, I would never marry him while Nona was living—never, never. I would sooner die."

"Dear, I think you are perfectly right."

"No, no, there has been sinning enough, and we can never make black white; and so I told Keefe, but somehow men don't see things in the same light, and he would argue about it until I said that I was sure his father would agree with me, and that silenced him. I tell you what, Eunice," went on Jem excitedly, "if this sort of thing were to go on I should get crazy myself, so I came to an understanding with Keefe. I am to provide him with funds, and he is to start at once to New York and make all possible inquiries, and after to-morrow we are not to meet again till we know for certain whether Nona is alive or dead."

"And if she be alive?" whispered Eunice, but she regretted her question when she saw Jem's face.

"Then we shall have to give each other up, but he has promised to let me keep Billy. God give me strength to bear it and help my Keefe!" And Jem's white lips quivered, and large tears coursed silently down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"I CANNOT SAY IT, KEEFE"

For the test of the heart is trouble,
  And it always comes with the years,
And the smile that is worth the praise of the earth
  Is the smile that comes through tears.

JEM'S straightforward simplicity had solved the difficult problem, and Keefe Desmond, crushed and well-nigh hopeless, had consented to be guided by her as though he were a child.

He was to start by the next steamer to New York, and on his arrival there he was to communicate at once with the police.

"You are to use as much money as you want, Keefe, remember that," Jem had said to him, "and not spare expense. What is a hundred or two when your peace of mind and my happiness are concerned? I would sooner lose thousands of pounds, that I would, than live in this horrid suspense another month, not knowing whether we are ever to be married or not." And then he promised her solemnly that he would leave no stone unturned to discover the truth.

Keefe Desmond spent the next day at the Dene, but Eunice only saw them at meals. Jem looked jaded and tired, but she bore herself bravely. "We must not let the servants suspect anything," she had said to Eunice the previous night; and during luncheon and dinner she talked almost feverishly, and Eunice followed her lead.

In the afternoon they took Billy for a walk. Keefe's restlessness needed movement, but Jem was so spent and weary on her return that he was filled with remorse for his thoughtlessness.

"I have tired you out," he said penitently; but Jem looked up in his face with a sad smile.

"What does that matter, dear?" she returned gently. "I was heart-tired and head-tired before we left the house. If you will ring the bell, Keefe, Eunice will come in and pour out the tea, and then I shall feel a bit better." But Jem's plump little hand shook as she took the cup.

After dinner Eunice retired to the morning-room and tried to read, but her attention wandered at every sound. Her girlish imagination was strongly impressed by the pitiful little drama that was being enacted under that roof.

What a horrible business it all was! Supposing that wretched woman were still alive and Keefe Desmond, unable to free himself from his shackles, condemned to a life of utter loneliness! What if Jem's cup of happiness, barely tasted, was to be dashed from her lips, and a cruel inexorable fate separate her from the object of her idolatry! Would her simple faith carry her through such bitter sorrow and humiliation?

"Anything would be preferable," thought Eunice, appalled at this dreary prospect; "even death would be a boon compared to such a parting. In the grave he would be safe from that woman and from the temptations of his own weak will, but a living separation like this would be unendurable. Loving him as she does, Miss Jem would never know a moment's peace; oh, I know her so well,—she would fret herself to a shadow with sheer pining and worry."

The sound of an opening door roused her from these painful reflections, and the next moment Keefe Desmond entered the room.

"I have come to say good-bye, Miss Cleveland," he said hurriedly; "they told me you were here. I trust you will wish me God-speed on my difficult mission."

"Indeed, I do most earnestly," returned Eunice, holding out her hand; "you have my good wishes."

"Thank you," in a tone of sad humility. "I am glad

that we are parting friends, for I can leave Miss Durnford in your care. I know, whatever happens, that you will be good to her."

"You may be sure of that, Mr. Desmond. Please believe me when I say that I trust this dark cloud will pass away, and that you and my dear Miss Jem may be happy; indeed, indeed, I wish it." Then he shook his head.

"It is kind of you to say that, but I cannot bring myself to believe that any such happiness is in store for me. I do not deserve her, Miss Cleveland; she is worthy of a better lot than I can offer her." And as he turned away his face was working with strong emotion.

Jem was waiting for him in the drawing-room. She came up to him and took his hands without speaking.

"Yes, I have said good-bye to her, Jem," he said sadly; "she was very kind. And now I must go, dear." And then, as he took her in his arms, Jem clung to him almost convulsively.

"I cannot say it, Keefe," she sobbed; "the words would choke me. Oh, my darling, my darling, if I could only go with you!"

"Oh, if you only could!" he returned with a sigh. "Jem, my dear, there is one thing I want to say. I have been a better man for knowing you, and whatever happens," pressing her closer to him, "I will promise, God helping me, that I will never do anything to shame your faithful love." And then he kissed her quietly and reverently. "Let me go now," he whispered. Then Jem's arms fell to her side, but before he had reached the door she had followed him and caught him by the hand.

"Keefe, I feel frightened," she gasped; "promise me that even if Nona is alive you will come to me again. Oh, my dear, don't turn your face away; there will be no sin in our seeing each other again and saying a few kind words, even if we are never to be man and wife. Keefe, my darling, promise me this," and there was anguish in Jem's tone.

"Yes, dear, I promise," he returned in a low, thrilling voice; "can I refuse my good angel anything? If it be possible I will surely come to you, even if we have only to wish each other good-bye." Then a wan smile came to Jem's lips. The next moment he was gone.

Jem had overtaxed her own powers of endurance, and nature took its revenge, for the next morning a severe sick headache made her unable to raise her head from the pillow.

She lay all day in a darkened room, watched over by the grim but faithful Susan.

"You just leave her to me, missy," she observed in a loud whisper to Eunice when the girl stole into the room. "I know what these worry headaches mean. I have seen Miss Jem just as bad when the old master died. She did not open her eyes or touch a morsel of food for twenty-four hours."

"Let Eunice come and speak to me," interrupted Jem in a faint, hollow voice; and as the girl bent over her anxiously, "You just leave me, as Susan says," she whispered, "she understands what to do, and she will be very good to me; but don't let me see Billy's face till I send for him, for it would just break my heart to have him near me." And Jem turned on her pillow with an oppressed sigh, while close to her heart lay a little note that Keefe had left on his way to the station.

Jem crept downstairs the next day, but she looked very pale and weak, and, except for a good-night kiss, she seemed unable to bear the sight of Billy.

The child looked at her rather reproachfully. "I don't like my Jemmy to be ill," he grumbled, "'cos she does not love me not one little bit."

"Oh yes, I do, Billy," returned poor Jem; "you are my own dear little boy, and daddy gave you to me. Oh, my Keefe—my Keefe!" and Jem broke into a feeble, nervous flood of tears, while Eunice, much frightened, hurried Billy away.

Jem was very much ashamed of her want of self-

control. "I am not myself, Eunice," she said apologetically; "the pain has worn me out, and I have not any more strength than a baby. I will go to bed now, and to-morrow I will behave myself better." But Jem's voice was not steady, and she walked upstairs so feebly that Eunice was quite alarmed, and a little later she went in search of Susan.

Susan was sitting at work in her own room. She looked unusually stern and unapproachable, but Eunice's sharp young eyes detected a faint redness of the eyelids, and she persisted in her inquiries.

"Now, Susan, don't be cross," she pleaded. "I am nearly as anxious as you are, and I have no one in the house to whom I can speak. Miss Jem looks dreadfully ill; don't you think she ought to see Dr. Hilliard?"

"No, I don't," snapped Susan, with such energy that her thread broke. "I never saw the doctor yet who could cure worry or a broken heart."

"A broken heart—good gracious, Susan!" and Eunice looked aghast.

"Well, worry, then," still more crossly. "I suppose any one with eyes in their head could see that Miss Jem is troubled about something. Oh, I am only a servant," continued Susan viciously, "and I am not supposed to know my mistress's secrets, but that it is more heartache than illness, that is my belief, missy, and there is nothing but time and patience for that."

Eunice did not venture to say more, but when she had left the room Susan threw her apron over her head and rocked herself in a perturbed fashion.

"Ay, poor lamb," she murmured, "it is just heartbreak. Didn't I hear that drab of a woman muttering to herself in the shrubbery about that false scoundrel Keefe Desmond? Oh, my dear, precious Miss Jem, there's trouble for her ahead! I can read the signs in her face, and I never trusted him." And Susan wept salt tears of mingled irritation and sorrow.

Jem fought bravely with her depression, but the sus-

pense tried her severely, and before Keefe had been gone a week she looked years older.

Eunice quite marvelled at her patience and unselfishness. One day, when they were sitting together, she gave expression to her thoughts.

"Miss Jem, you are so good, I wish I were more like you." Then Jem looked at her a little absently.

"Whatever can you be meaning, Eunice?"

Then the girl smiled at her affectionately. "I mean that you set us all such an example," she returned quietly. "You have all this on your mind; you are so troubled and unhappy that you cannot sleep at night, and yet you never spare yourself, and you do every duty that comes to hand just as though you felt well and cheerful. You were packing those hampers with Mrs. Compton all this morning though you were ready to drop with fatigue, and you would not let me help you."

"It is better for me to be busy," returned Jem hurriedly. "It makes the time pass more quickly, and takes my thoughts off a bit; besides, why should the poor women at the workhouse go without their treat because I am harassed and disturbed in my mind? When I am sitting with my hands before me," she went on sadly, "I am always on the sea with Keefe. It seems as though I could see him pacing the deck, with his arms folded, and that worried frown on his face that I know so well. He will have arrived at New York by now," rousing into animation, "and I shall be having a letter in another ten days or so." Then Jem's blue eyes grew soft and happy.

A little later she roused herself from a reverie. "Eunice, my dear," she said quietly, "we will keep all this business to ourselves. Lilian will be spending the day here to-morrow, but we must be careful not to let her guess anything." And as Eunice looked rather surprised at this, Jem continued firmly, "Keefe's a proud man, and he has had enough to humble him, and I mean to keep his secrets as long as possible, even from my dearest friends. Lilian tells everything to Douglas; it

always troubles her if she has to keep anything from him; and though she is a dear little soul, and as good as gold, I had as lief that Lilian did not know; so we will just hold our tongues, you and me, and put as good a face as we can upon it."

But in spite of Jem's heroic efforts to be cheerful, Lilian soon detected that there was something amiss with her friends; but with her unfailing tact she talked on in her usual chatty fashion.

She had plenty of news to tell them. Araby had returned home, utterly worn out with her fortnight's shopping, but insisting, in her reckless way, that she was perfectly well.

The trousseau had been ordered on the most extravagant scale, and Lilian frankly expressed her opinion that such splendour was hardly consistent for a farmer's wife; but as she had bought it with her own money no one could venture on a remonstrance. The invitations for the wedding would be shortly sent out, and the bridesmaids' dresses had been chosen.

"By the bye, Miss Jem," observed Lilian, checking herself at this point, "you and Eunice will soon be going to town, I expect, to get your wedding clothes."

Then a dull flush crossed Jem's face. "I have clean forgot all about our finery," she said in a subdued voice. "London is out of the question just now, for I couldn't leave home at present." Then she looked anxiously at Eunice. "Should you be much disappointed, my dear, if we got our dresses at Disborough? There is a good dressmaker there, and I daresay she would turn us out all right, and Araby need not know that they were not ordered in Bond Street."

"My dear Miss Jem, how can you ask me such a question?" returned Eunice in a shocked voice. "Of course; there is not the slightest need for us to go up to town; we can get all we want at Disborough."

"I don't seem to care for the jaunt just now," replied Jem in rather a melancholy tone; "so if you are willing,

Eunice, we will go later. And one of these fine days, when I am less busy, we will go over to Disborough and look at Miss Martin's patterns." And so it was settled.

Later in the afternoon, when Lilian took her departure, Eunice as usual walked with her to the gate. Lilian looked somewhat grave.

"Eunice," she said suddenly, "there is something very much amiss with Miss Jem. She looks ill and quite unlike herself. Oh, I am not going to ask any awkward questions," as Eunice seemed rather out of countenance.

"Very likely there are good reasons why our dear old friend does not confide in us; but all the same she is very unhappy."

"Dear Lilian, I can tell you nothing," in a weary voice.

"That is a sufficient answer, dear; but at least I may tell you what I know. Betty Prior told me this morning that her lodger had gone away for a month or two, but that he was keeping on his rooms. I was just going to mention this to Miss Jem, but something in her manner checked me."

"Mr. Desmond has gone away on business," returned Eunice. "Of course, Miss Jem misses him very much."

"But he will come back?"

"Oh yes, of course; at least, we hope so." Eunice hardly knew what she was saying, but to her relief Lilian suddenly dropped the subject.

"It is not my fault if Lilian guesses anything," Eunice thought as she walked back to the house. But her mind would not have been so easy if she could have read Lilian's thoughts.

"There is something very wrong," she was saying to herself. "Mr. Desmond has gone away on some mysterious business, and Miss Jem looks careworn and half-a-dozen years older. Even Eunice is constrained and unlike herself. There seems nothing but trouble everywhere." And Lilian sighed as she mounted her bicycle and rode swiftly down the country roads in the soft freshness of the spring evening.

CHAPTER XXXV

"IF IT SHOULD NOT LAST!"

And there are things that blight the soul as with a mildew blight,
And in the temple of the Lord put out the blessed light.
—MRS. E. O. SMITH.

THE following afternoon Eunice went to Chez-Nous. Jem had suggested it as they sat at luncheon.

"It will never do for Araby to think that we do not take interest in all her fine preparations," she had observed; "and it would only be kind and neighbourly to step round for a chat." And as Eunice assented to this, Jem continued, "Give her my love, and tell her I would have come myself, only I am a bit tired and headachy." And Jem looked rather sad as she rose from the table; those weary days of dull suspense and inaction were hard to bear; her only comfort was to shut herself up alone with Billy.

Billy was a somewhat exacting companion, and traded largely on Jem's patience and forbearance. "Why do you play games so seriously?" he would say. "I want my Jemmy to laugh sometimes, and not be always staring out of the window." Then Jem would rouse herself with a little start, and smile in a feeble, deprecating way. "Dear, dear, what a silly I am, dearie!" she would exclaim. "For I clean forgot all about the game. Let me see, I am old Mother Hubbard and you are the dog; now go into the cupboard, and we will begin all over again." But before ten minutes had elapsed Jem had forgotten her part once more.

Mrs. Pater was out paying a round of calls, the servant informed Eunice when she arrived at Chez-Nous. But Miss Pater was in her sitting-room upstairs, and the ayah

soon brought down a message that she would be glad to see Miss Cleveland.

Araby was writing letters in the bay-window, but she rose at once and received her visitor with unusual cordiality.

"You are as welcome as April showers and May sunshine together," she exclaimed, kissing her lightly on both cheeks, and pushing her gently towards an easy-chair beside the writing-table. "I am quite tired of my own society. Tina is out as usual, and Ian is inspecting the new greenhouses, and when I saw you coming up the avenue I was as pleased as possible. Somehow I find my own company rather too exciting this afternoon."

Eunice smiled at this odd speech. She thought it was only one of Araby's startling paradoxes, but to her surprise the girl looked at her quite seriously.

"Oh, I mean what I say," she returned abruptly. "It is not always good to be alone; great happiness can be as restless as great sorrow. When I am left too long to myself my imagination runs away with me like an unruly steed, and I can neither restrain nor control it. I was trying to work off my restlessness by writing letters, but I have hardly completed a page."

Eunice felt a little puzzled; this was a strange beginning to their conversation. Araby was looking better than she expected from Lilian's account; her delicate fairness was set off by her grey dress and breast-knot of pale yellow primroses. As she spoke her eyes grew dark and brilliant, and the wild-rose flush came into her face. At such moments Araby was positively beautiful.

"I wonder how you would feel in my place?" she continued, happily unconscious of Eunice's sudden start. "You have such a healthy, well-balanced mind, that you never conjure up these disturbed images and terrors. I am such a self-tormentor that at times I cannot bring myself to believe in my own happiness. I am too happy, Eunice," in a voice of deep inward emotion, "and sometimes I get frightened when I think of it; if it should

not last, if it should not last!" and the tears gathered slowly to her eyes. Eunice felt touched in spite of her own sense of pain. How strange, she thought, that any woman blessed with Douglas Hilton's love should have room in her heart for such unworthy fears! Again and again she had felt perplexed by Araby's complex and bewildering personality. To give comfort one must understand, and at this moment Eunice, with all her sympathy, failed in comprehension.

"Why should it not last?" she asked rather lamely; then Araby turned away to the window. For the tears were flowing fast now.

"How can I tell?" she replied in a broken voice; "except that I am not worthy of happiness. If I could only find one person on God's earth to understand me," she continued almost passionately; "but there is not one. I used to talk to Lilian, she was very kind; but I could see that it only troubled her, and that she thought me weak and morbid; and once I tried to make Douglas understand," but here Araby shuddered slightly, "but I shall never do that again as long as I live."

"Why not, dear Araby? I should have thought Mr. Hilton would have been your best confidant."

"Oh, you do not know Douglas," returned Araby bitterly, "or you would not ask me that question. He is a good man, he has the truest heart and the best nature possible; but his imagination is limited. When I tried to explain my feelings he refused to listen, absolutely refused, Eunice. He said I was hysterical, and that I ought not to repeat such nonsensical thoughts, and then he petted me and told me that I was a little goose. I never felt so small in my life, never. I was very near breaking with him for good and all, I was so hurt and angry; but he was so kind that I could not do it."

Eunice sighed; she found it easy enough to understand Douglas Hilton's feelings. She knew well how Araby's fantastic and morbid imaginings would jar on his man's judgment. He and Lilian were so calm and reasonable;

there was no grain of quicksilver in their nature. Douglas would as soon have believed that the ghostly friars haunted the old hall at midnight as admit that Araby had any ground for her diseased imaginations, and yet they were far more real to her than he guessed.

"Dear Araby, I wish I knew how to help you," continued Eunice after a brief silence. "I cannot help thinking that a great deal of this trouble is owing to your weak health; if you were stronger you would not have these depressed feelings."

"That is what Lilian says. You two always seem to think alike. If only I could believe it too!"

"It is certainly the truth, dear; ask any doctor, and he will tell you so."

"Don't speak to me of doctors, I hate them!" returned Araby excitedly; "they exaggerate every little ailment, and take the worst possible view. The one in London actually told Tina that if I did not winter abroad every year I should go into a decline. Why, I laughed in her face when she repeated that to me, but all the same I gave her no peace till she promised that she would not tell Douglas."

"Do you think it was quite right to induce her to make that promise?" asked Eunice rather timidly. Then Araby drew herself up with a haughty gesture; she looked extremely angry.

"Yes, it was right," she replied firmly. "Do you suppose I would allow Douglas to hear such an opinion as that? If I believed it, how could I bring myself to marry him, knowing that we should be parted for six months in the year, unless he chose to be exiled with me? No, Eunice, you shall not make me uncomfortable; there was no truth in Dr. Whitlaw's statement; he was an alarmist, and took exaggerated views of my case."

Eunice remained silent. Was Araby right in this supposition, or was she merely blinding herself wilfully? Eunice found it impossible to answer this. Dr. Whitlaw might be an alarmist, as she said; nevertheless, in her

opinion Araby's future husband had a right to be told everything. She could not divest herself of a suspicion that Araby was not quite straight in this matter, and that her excitability and anger proved this.

"In her place I would have told him everything," thought Eunice, who was too thoroughly honest to comprehend the windings of a nature like Araby's. "It is not treating him fairly." Perhaps her silence was more eloquent than she knew, for though Araby soon recovered her temper she changed the subject rather abruptly, and began talking of her bridesmaids' dresses, and of the wedding presents she had already received.

Eunice tried to appear interested, but she was inwardly oppressed. When Araby began describing her magnificent trousseau and the various gowns she had ordered, a vague sense of unreality seemed to creep over Eunice's mind. Could this young bride-elect, who was discussing fabrics and fashions with such animation, be the same creature as the Araby who was shedding tears an hour ago? Had those morbid fears and fancies vanished at the touch of ivory satin and Brussels lace? Could the sight of the bridal veil banish all those weird and melancholy thoughts? Or was Araby only playing a part, in her eagerness to efface some of her conversation from Eunice's mind? This doubt was present when she heard Araby's parting words.

"I am afraid I have said some foolish things this afternoon, Eunice, and I want you to forget them. I was in one of my crazy moods, and said more than I ought; but," looking at her with peculiar fixity, "you will respect my confidence?"

"Need you ask me that, Araby?"

"No; I beg your pardon, you and Lilian have both the same sense of honour. I can trust you."

"Oh, if you could only trust yourself!" thought Eunice, but she left the words unspoken. She was glad that Araby bade her good-bye so affectionately, for she feared that once or twice she had been unresponsive and wanting

in sympathy; but if so, Araby seemed to bear her no grudge, and her "Come again soon" sounded quite cordial. Eunice walked rather sadly down the avenue; for the first time she realised that Araby was not to be envied. What availed wealth, love, and the prospect of happiness, if tranquillity and peace of mind were denied her? The chalice of the elixir of life, sparkling and foaming, was held to her lips, but some strange infusion of bitterness was mingled with it, and she hesitated to drink it; what if it failed to quench her thirst, and there was only left the rim of the empty cup!

The strange sadness of her tone haunted Eunice. "If it should not last—if it should not last!" with what dejection she had uttered those words!

There must be some secret cause for these melancholy forebodings; was it possible that Araby's conscience and sense of duty were warring against her inclinations? There was something that Eunice's honest simplicity could not fathom. "It is no use trying to understand her," she thought. "I don't believe she understands herself;" but here Eunice started at the sudden click of the gate. The next moment the brown tweed shooting-coat and broad shoulders of Douglas Hilton were revealed to her sight. It was so unexpected, that Eunice was not quite mistress of herself; and even Douglas seemed slightly embarrassed at this sudden encounter, but he recovered himself at once.

"I am afraid I startled you, Miss Cleveland," with a keen look at her grave face; "you were so lost in thought that you did not hear me; you seemed to be trying to solve a very knotty problem."

"I was puzzling myself, certainly," she returned with a smile; "there is so much to perplex one in daily life; but I must not keep you," holding out her hand timidly, "you are going up to the house."

"Oh, there is plenty of time," he replied coolly, "and Araby is not expecting me to-day. I will walk a little way back with you. We never see you at Monkbarn now."

"Lilian was with us yesterday," returned Eunice hurriedly. Mr. Hilton had spoken with his old kindness; he seemed pleased to see her, and to talk to her. "I have been very much taken up of late; Miss Jem has not been as well as usual."

"Lilian thought her looking very unlike herself," replied Mr. Hilton. "She was quite troubled about her. Do you think she would care to see me this evening, Miss Cleveland? for I would walk to the Dene with you now." But Eunice discouraged this proposition.

"Miss Jem was lying down with a headache when I came out," she replied truthfully. "I do not think she will be inclined for visitors; it would be better for you to come some other day, Mr. Hilton."

"Very well," he returned reluctantly; "but I shall drive over soon. Lilian and I feel anxious about our old friend; if there is anything that I can do," and here he looked straight at Eunice.

"Thank you, there is nothing," replied the girl gently; "one cannot live without worries, and even dear Miss Jem must have her share like other people." Then, changing the subject very hastily, "I am glad to see Araby so much better, Mr. Hilton."

"Is that your opinion?" was his answer, in a somewhat surprised tone. "She is very thin and has not yet lost her cough; she did far too much in town."

"Perhaps the warmer weather may set her to rights," returned Eunice, repenting her speech the moment she had uttered it. For the time she had forgotten Dr. Whitlaw's prophecy, and the remembrance made her feel as though she were an accessory to some culpable secret.

"Oh yes, Araby wants warmth and sunshine," he returned cheerfully. "Listen to that bird, Miss Cleveland," pausing in the road as he spoke. "I always think spring the grandest time in the year."

"I never spent it in the country before," observed Eunice. How beautiful it all was—the deep blue of the sky, the young tender green of the foliage over their

heads, the sweet clear notes of the thrush! Spring, the season for fresh young life, for budding hopes, for youthful love; how still and peaceful it was! not a human creature in sight; only the soft twittering of birds hovering near their nests. She was alone with Douglas Hilton, and his kind, friendly voice was like music in her ears; the sweetness of that hour was long remembered by Eunice, and perhaps, who knows? by Douglas also!

"I must go now," he observed presently, as though rousing himself from some subtle spell. "Good-bye, Miss Cleveland; give my love to Miss Jem," and the next moment Eunice heard his footsteps receding in the road. The thrush was still singing, but she no longer listened. "If it should not last," she was saying to herself; "if it should not last!"

The days passed, and the weeks; but there was no end to the suspense.

Keefe Desmond wrote regularly by every mail, but as yet his search was unsuccessful, and time and money seemed fruitlessly wasted. These letters only made Jem look more sad and careworn. All possible investigation had been made, and at one time they had discovered a clue. A woman of the name of O'Rourke had been lodging with her husband about two years before in a big tenement in one of the poorer quarters of New York. A widow, Mrs. Sullivan, who was their close neighbour, had described them with some degree of accuracy, and there was no doubt that it was really Bella O'Rourke. "She was a big, dark woman," Mrs. Sullivan had told Keefe, "and quarrelled awful with her husband. They were noisy neighbours; Dan O'Rourke was given to drinking, and his wife was seldom sober. She remembered a handsome, flashy sort of person, who lived with them for a time. She believed her name was Nona Sutton; no, it was not Desmond. Mrs. Sullivan would take her oath of that; never heard such a name in her life. She was a play-actress, and a thorough bad lot; and all the other lodgers were thankful when they all

three left." Up to this point all was plain sailing, but the rest of Mrs. Sullivan's narrative was pure conjecture.

She had no idea why they left the tenement, or if they remained in New York; she had heard of the accident to the steamer. Some one had told her that Dan O'Rourke had been drowned, and that some woman had dragged him down under the water; but this was all that Keefe had extracted. Still, he had verified one fact, Dan O'Rourke's death; he had even seen the spot where he had been buried, and had read the list of the unfortunate victims who had been drowned. But the name of Nona Desmond or Nona Sutton was not amongst them.

Jem turned very pale when she read the closing paragraph of Keefe's letter; it was evidently written in profound discouragement and hopeless dejection.

"I feel as though I have no right to use your money, dearest friend," he wrote, "and if you bid me give up the search I shall have no cause to complain. I begin to think that Bella spoke the truth, and my wretched wife is alive. There was something in that diabolical plot that was worthy of Nona. Her nature was cruel, and there were times, when we lived together, when I thought she would have driven me mad. Bella was bad enough, but she was not so evil-minded as Nona. Good God! when I think of the life those two women led me, I could curse myself and them. Forgive me for writing like this, but I am losing heart and courage. Shall I ever come back to you a free man? and will you kill the fatted calf for your poor prodigal? my own dear, faithful Jem."

How Jem kissed those words, and blotted them with her tears, before she folded the letter up and placed it under her pillow! For Jem was losing heart too; and her sad eyes and pale cheeks bore witness to many a sleepless night.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE MANOR WOOD

When our hearts are hot and weary
  With life's turmoil and its fret,
When this troubled world of ours
  For a while we would forget,
Then the children come about us,
  And with tiny, trusting hands,
By some pleasant, sunny pathway
  Lead us back to morning lands.
—HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

THE little world of Disborough and Shepperton was sorely puzzled by the mysterious disappearance of Keefe Desmond. Hardly had the news of Miss Durnford's engagement to the strange artist lodging at Honey Hanger cottage become public property, before the lover vanished, leaving his boy as hostage behind him. Visitors were plentiful at the Dene just then; but Jem's manner baffled them and hindered all inquiries. "Mr. Desmond had gone to America on business," she observed simply to one and all; "it was quite unavoidable, and he might be detained some time." And then Jem would change the subject, and talk of the approaching wedding at Chez-Nous, and her visitors would reluctantly follow her lead.

But the gossips and scandalmongers were not appeased by Jem's quiet explanation, and there was much head-shaking and incredulity amongst the spinsters of Disborough.

"It is all very well for Miss Durnford to put a bold face on it," remarked Miss Adeline Meyrick, a lady of uncertain age, and still more uncertain temper, "and to

tell us in that cool manner that Mr. Desmond had gone away on business; it must be a queer sort of business, I am thinking, for Miss Durnford looks quite pinched and old."

"I was thinking so myself, Addie," returned her sister. Miss Lucy Meyrick always agreed with her strong-minded senior. "She has been suffering from headaches; Miss Cleveland told me so."

Miss Adeline snorted. "Headaches, and you were silly enough to believe her, Lucy! but you are always ready to swallow anything. Take my word for it, he has jilted her, and bolted with some of her money. I never did believe in that man. Don't you remember Dick Renshaw called him 'a dark horse'? Do you suppose such a dashing-looking fellow would ever marry a plain little body like Jem Durnford? No, it is not in human nature; my fine gentleman has bolted—leaving the child behind him—and she is just trying to brazen it out for a bit;" and this view of the case was soon held by a good many of the Disborough folk. "It must be true," remarked one of them; "Adeline Meyrick is a little too sharp sometimes, but she is generally right in the long-run; and something serious must have happened, or Miss Durnford would not be shutting herself up and refusing all invitations. Why, she was not at the Archdeacon's the other night; sent an excuse at the last minute. So Miss Prescott told Mrs. Pater." And so on, through the whole gamut of female gossip and curiosity.

It was certainly true that Jem's courage had failed her at the last moment. For the first time in her life she shrank painfully from these social functions.

"I don't feel as though I could face it," she said to Eunice, when the girl had warned her of the lateness of the hour, and begged her to dress; "they will all come buzzing about me and asking me questions, and my head will be in a whirl with the lights and music; could you not go without me, dear?" But Eunice flatly refused to

do this, and in the end a note was sent to Miss Prescott; and after this Jem declined all invitations.

"I can't help what my neighbours think of me," she said dejectedly, when Eunice was trying to persuade her to spend a quiet evening at the vicarage. "But I have not the heart to be laughing and talking, and pretending to be enjoying myself, when my poor Keefe is so miserable. We are both losing hope, Eunice, and I can no longer put a good face on it and cheat people. I feel as though I want to hide myself. I never had such a feeling before in my life." And Jem's face worked pitifully as she twisted her opal ring restlessly round and round, in a way that had become habitual to her; and after this Eunice ceased to press her.

The shopping expedition to Shelgate had been delayed from day to day, and Eunice was sorely perplexed how to act. More than once she had hinted to Miss Jem that the time was passing, and had received an ambiguous answer. It was evident that Jem dreaded the idea of the wedding.

"However shall I go through it with all this on my mind?" she said once to Eunice. "I am afraid of breaking down, and disgracing myself in the church; I feel so bad. But Mrs. Pater and Araby would never forgive me if I stayed away."

It was just a month before the wedding when Jem made her sad little complaint.

"Perhaps we need not go after all," returned Eunice with a sudden sense of relief; the thought of that day oppressed her like a nightmare. But, to her disappointment, Jem seemed quite shocked at this.

"Oh, we must go," she sighed; "whatever would Douglas and Lilian say? I was only grumbling a bit; I did not really mean it. Let me see—why, it is the 14th of May; only a month to the wedding. Good gracious, Eunice, what have I been thinking of? and we have not got a thing to wear;" and here Jem grew fidgety and excited. "Sit down and write a line to Miss Martin,

there's a good girl, and tell her to have her patterns ready; we will go over to Shelgate to-morrow, whatever the weather is;" and Jem kept her word.

It was a trying day to Eunice. Jem's brief fussiness had vanished, and she could not be induced to take any interest in the patterns. Miss Martin grew visibly anxious when her favourite and most satisfactory customer regarded her best and choicest fabrics with languid indifference.

"Dear Miss Jem, surely you will tell us which pattern you prefer," whispered Eunice coaxingly in her ear. "Look at this lovely pearl-grey silk; it is just the thing, Miss Martin says, for a summer wedding."

"Oh, I daresay it is pretty enough," returned Jem indifferently; "only I shall look like a scarecrow in it. Look here, Eunice. I don't feel up to things to-day. I shall leave it to you and Miss Martin." Then was Miss Martin wondrously content, and the delicate pearl-grey silk was immediately selected.

Jem took far more interest in Eunice's attire. She insisted that a soft mauve silk which Eunice had rejected as far too fine and dainty should be chosen for her. "You look very nice in pale mauve, Eunice," with a touch of her old manner. "We will get a pretty hat to match, and then you will look as well as any one." But Jem's flicker of interest soon died away.

Eunice almost regretted her choice of the grey silk when Susan had unpacked it and laid it on her mistress's bed.

"Dear me, it is quite lovely, Miss Jem!" she exclaimed, as she adjusted the pale silvery folds almost reverently. "It would have just done for your own wedding. You are a bit too old for white. Ain't she, Miss Cleveland?"

"Oh, I don't know," returned Eunice hurriedly, for she heard a little sobbing breath behind her. "Let me help you put it away, Susan, and then we will unpack mine," but before the dress was in the wardrobe Jem had left the room.

Susan's unfortunate speech touched on too tender a spot, and for the rest of the day Jem was silent and depressed.

An unusually good night refreshed her, however, and the next morning she looked more like her old self, and actually of her own accord proposed a little expedition for the afternoon.

For some days Billy had clamoured to pick cowslips and bluebells in a certain little wood and meadow Susan had described to him. The wood was midway between Shepperton and Medfield, and Eunice had more than once heard it mentioned by Lilian. "It belongs to old Mr. Farleigh," she once said, "but there is a public pathway through the wood. We always use it ourselves, for it is a short cut to the Manor House. When we were children, Douglas and I used to make cowslip balls for a little cripple in the village. Dear little Janie! I can see her face now, when Douglas tossed the great golden ball to her. The finest cowslips always grew in the meadow —just beyond the Manor Wood."

"Billy is giving me no peace about the cowslips," observed Jem as they sat at breakfast. "He was at it again this morning directly he was awake. It would be a pity to disappoint him, so, if you are willing, Compton shall drive us over to Retford this afternoon."

Eunice's eyes sparkled with pleasure. She had always wished to visit the Manor Wood. Lilian had told her that there were wild orchids to be found, as well as primroses and bluebells.

"What a delightful idea!" she exclaimed enthusiastically; "and it is such a lovely day, too."

Then Jem smiled languidly. In spite of her trouble she was still true to herself. To give pleasure to others was her natural instinct. No day was perfect in her eyes unless it could record some kindly deed, some secret bounty. When one is cold at heart it is at least comforting to warm one's hands at some fire we have kindled on another's hearth, for holy is the flame of charity.

Eunice's unfeigned delight excited Jem to farther efforts.

"I think I shall tell Mrs. Compton to pack the tea-basket," she continued after a moment's reflection, "for we shall be there all the afternoon, and Billy will be wanting his tea. We will take some milk, and a bottle or two of cold tea, and some cakes and jam-puffs; and while you are picking flowers I can just sit and rest myself. Flower-gathering isn't in my line. I call it backachy work, but I shall be quite content to be still;" and Eunice was well pleased with the suggestion. Jem trotted off with something like her old briskness to interview her factotum, Mrs. Compton.

Billy's excitement knew no bounds. He hugged Jem so roughly that she emerged from his embrace quite red in the face; and he would not have eaten his dinner, only Eunice threatened to leave him behind, and then he consented to finish his pudding. But long before the carriage was round Billy was strutting up and down the hall, with his straw hat set at the back of his fair curly head, and a huge basket on his arm almost as big as himself. "All a-blowing and a-growing," he chanted; "three bunches for a penny; cowslips, fine cowslips!" shouted the small boy.

"Dear, what a thing it is to be a child!" sighed Jem. "Isn't he happy, Susan, the pretty fellow!"

"Most people would be happy if they thought their basket was full, though it made their arm ache to carry it," replied Susan shortly. "Missy, you'll be wanting a trowel if you mean to get up the primrose roots. I will step round and ask Benton for one."

There was quite a commotion in the household before they were off, with Billy, now minus a hat, hanging out of the window.

"Don't you wish you were coming too, old Susan? but I will bring you lots of flowers. Let me alone, Miss Cleveland!" as Eunice dislodged him from his perilous position. "Girls are so silly; and I mean to sit by my

Jemmy, I do," plumping down beside Jem and laying a podgy, hot hand on her lap. How could Jem fail to smile at the close proximity of her darling?

The horses were frisky with much corn and little exercise, for the past week had been wet, so they were soon at their destination.

The Manor Wood was quite equal to Lilian's description. It was very tiny, a mere woodland nook almost hidden from the road, and a little rivulet ran through it —a thread-like stream meandering on one side of the pathway. The cowslip meadow lay below it, and in the May sunshine it looked like another Field of the Cloth of Gold. Billy was wild to begin picking cowslips, but Eunice begged to explore the wood first; besides, they must find a place where Miss Jem could rest comfortably. She had her way, and the next moment there was a flash of colour between the trees. The bluebells were not over, then. No, there they were in one huge patch—a blue pool shimmering in the hollow. Billy's eyes widened at the sight, and Eunice caught her breath. Poor little cockney as she was, she had never seen a bed of wild hyacinths bending their delicate heads as the spring breeze gambolled lightly over them. "It is like a little bit of the sky fallen into the wood," she murmured.

"Dear Miss Jem, there is such a nice seat for you here," pointing to a mossy corner under a hoary old willow. "You are just by the footpath, so you will not be lonely when we leave you, and you can just rest and feast your eyes on this loveliness."

Jem nodded her acquiescence, and the tea-basket and a rug or two and her knitting-bag were brought from the carriage, and then Compton put up his horses in the stable of the little village inn, and strolled off to see an old acquaintance who kept the post-office.

Jem was quite content to sit there and watch the flower-gatherers. It amused her to tie up the big blue bundles they brought her. There was quite a floral cairn before they had finished—all of blue and gold. When they

quitted the wood for the cowslip meadow she sat and listened dreamily to their voices—Eunice's girlish laugh and Billy's shrill childish voice answering her.

Somehow it soothed Jem's worn spirits to sit there in the sunny silence, with the bluebells nodding and curtseying below her in the breeze. Sometimes they seemed to ripple like a tiny blue wave. Jem drew Keefe's last letter from her bosom, although she knew it by heart.

"I wonder how long this weary search is to go on?" he wrote; "the clue is broken, and heaven knows if we shall ever discover the trail! Oh, Jem, how sick I am of it all! Last night I dreamt I was back again at the Dene; you and Bill were sitting by the fire, and you gave me such a welcome. 'I am come home, Jem,' I heard myself saying, 'I have come home to you and Bill.' Oh, how I wish that dream were true! I wish it with all my heart, dear."

Jem read this again and again until her eyes grew dim, and then she roused herself and set out the tea on the green, mossy sward. She could hear by their voices that they were coming back; the next moment they appeared, bearing the big basket between them, heaped up with golden treasure.

"I am quite tired out," gasped Eunice, as she flung herself down beside Jem, "and we have left quite a little heap at one corner of the meadow, as our basket was full. Billy says he will go and fetch it after tea, while I begin a cowslip ball—you will help me, won't you, Miss Jem?"

"I'll help too when I come back," panted Billy manfully. "Oh, we have had such a lovely time, Jemmy dear! it was just ducky of you to bring us to this nice place;" and Billy blew her a kiss.

Mrs. Compton had catered with her usual liberality, and there was a goodly store of home-made cakes and scones; the jam-puffs had not been forgotten, and Billy became at once hilarious and sticky.

"What a pity it is that people can't go on being

hungry!" he observed, as he eyed the tempting pile that remained; "if I tried ever so I couldn't eat no more. I think I'll fetch those cowslips," starting up with renewed zeal, and nudging Eunice in a friendly manner. "You get on with the ball, Clevy," his usual abbreviation of Miss Cleveland, "and I'll be back directly minute." And Billy started off, proud to do his errand without petticoat supervision, for even curly-haired boyhood has its fits of incipient mannishness.

"Bless his dear heart!" exclaimed Jem, in the motherly tone that had grown habitual to her; "I suppose there is no harm in his going off alone, Eunice?"

"Oh dear no!" returned the girl decidedly, "he will hardly be out of sight, and I can easily make him hear."

"I don't believe any one but the Retford children ever come to the wood, not at this time, any way," but scarcely had Jem delivered herself of this speech before a shadow on the pathway beside them made them both look up. A woman's face was peering at them between the bushes; a dark gipsy face, with rough touzled hair, and bold, flashing eyes, that they recognised at once.

"Good heavens, Eunice, it is that Bella O'Rourke!" exclaimed Jem in a frightened tone; "whatever shall we do? and Compton won't be here for another hour;" but before Eunice could answer the woman came slowly towards them.

"Oh, I thought I could not be mistaken," she said triumphantly. "You recollect me, don't you, Miss Durnford? I am Keefe Desmond's sister-in-law, Bella O'Rourke."

CHAPTER XXXVII

BELLA O'ROURKE

The lowest ebb is the turn of the tide.—LONGFELLOW.

Some are sowing the seeds of word and deed,
Which the cold know not, nor the careless heed,
Of the gentle word, and the kindly deed,
That hath blessed the earth in its sorest need;
Sweet shall the harvest be.

IT was certainly the same woman who had brought the ill-omened story to the Dene that March afternoon, and yet as Jem looked at her with a sense of shivering repulsion she was conscious of a change in her. Even in those two months she had deteriorated; her tawdry finery looked frayed and shabby, and she had lost her brazen, impudent expression. She was a big woman, but somehow she looked dwindled and flabby as though she had been ill, and her black eyes were sunken and lustreless, but she was undeniably sober.

"Mrs. O'Rourke, you have no right to pester us like this," began Jem severely; "you have done mischief enough already, and I will have nothing to say to you." But Bella turned a deaf ear to this; they were not going to get rid of her so easily!

"I suppose that was Billy," she observed coolly. "He ran past me so quick that I could not recognise him; he ain't a bit like Nona, he never was. I suppose the kid takes after Keefe."

Jem made no answer.

"You need not be so stiff with me, Miss Durnford," in a whining voice, "for a more unfortunate creature never lived. I have been laid up in the Shelgate Infirm-

ary for weeks. I had an accident one foggy night and was pretty nearly killed. Look at my arm," thrusting it so suddenly in Jem's face that she instinctively drew back, "it ain't half its size, and I am that tired and hungry that I can hardly drag myself a step farther."

"How am I to know that you are speaking the truth, Mrs. O'Rourke?" returned Jem in a hesitating voice; the woman certainly looked ill, and she was eyeing the simple repast laid out on the grass with almost a wolfish look.

"It is gospel truth, Miss Durnford; you can ask Dr. Ashton who attended me at the Infirmary; they turned me out three or four days ago, and I have used all my money. I was trying to find my way to Shepperton to beg some help from Keefe, only my limbs would not carry me, and I thought I would turn into the wood for a rest."

"And you want food?"—Jem's voice was less severe.

"I have only had a drink of water and a penny roll the whole of this blessed day," returned the woman miserably.

"'If thine enemy hunger, feed him,'" murmured Jem to herself. Then aloud, "If you will sit on the grass, you can take all that is before you. Eunice, I think there is some tea left, and Billy has not drunk all the milk; there are plenty of scones and cakes;" and the next moment the wanderer was partaking of a plentiful meal.

There was no need to question the truth of her statement, for she ate and drank as though she were starving, and Jem looked on pitifully.

There was very little food remaining when Bella had finished her meal.

"There, I feel a different woman now," she observed by way of grace after meat, "thank you kindly, Miss Durnford; now I must be getting on my way if I am to reach Shepperton to-night. If you could spare me a trifle of money I might get a lift in a cart, for I am bound to find Keefe."

"You will not find him at Shepperton," replied Jem

sternly; "you have yourself to thank for that, Mrs. O'Rourke. Keefe has been in New York for nearly two months." Then Bella's face fell, she seemed quite dazed.

"Keefe in New York!" she echoed almost stupidly; "what on earth is he doing there?"

"He is trying to find out if you told him the truth," was Jem's answer, "and if his wife is really living as you said."

"Mercy on us, you don't say so!" and Bella's countenance had a guilty, ashamed expression. "To think of him searching for Nona in New York when she has been in her grave for at least nine months." But before she could say more Jem had started up like a fury and had gripped her fiercely by the arm; for once in her life Jem was in a passion.

"You dare to tell me any more lies, you good-for-nothing creature! I am sorry I gave you any food, you deserve to starve for your wickedness. You have sent my Keefe over the sea on a cock-and-bull story that may have no truth; and you are breaking my heart, that is what you are doing." And then Jem's voice failed her, choked by a rush of tears.

"Ain't she a bit off her head, miss?" asked Bella in a scared voice. "You have no cause to pinch me black-and-blue, Miss Durnford, just because I got into a temper with Keefe and told a bit of a fib. I don't say it was right, but they had treated me too often on the road, and I had got fuddled with strong liquor on an empty stomach. If Keefe had kept a civil tongue in his head and spoken me fair I would have told him no lies."

"Eunice!" exclaimed poor Jem, pressing her hands to her temples, as though she were distracted, "this woman will drive me mad. One moment she says Nona is alive, and the next she is dead."

"Leave her to me, dearest," whispered Eunice soothingly. "You are too much agitated to manage her." Then aloud. "Mrs. O'Rourke, you can see for yourself the pain you are giving. Miss Durnford can bear no

more uncertainty. Surely it will be for your interest to be honest with us, for you will gain nothing by deceit and lies. If you hope for any assistance from her you must tell her the whole truth."

"And I am quite willing to do so, miss, being down on my luck and as sober as a judge, if Miss Durnford will only believe me," and Bella spoke resentfully. "I would not have trumped up that tale if Keefe had not aggravated me when the liquor was in my head."

"Then, on your word and honour, Mrs. O'Rourke, is your sister Nona alive or not?"

"No, miss, she ain't; she died of influenza quite nine months ago. She was only ill a few days. But from the first there was no chance; she had taken to drinking, and it had undermined her constitution."

"Were you with her when she died?"

Bella nodded.

"I helped to nurse her. But there, I will tell you how it all was. It was true what I told Keefe about the accident to the steamer when my Dan was drowned. He hadn't a chance, poor fellow, for Nona—she was a big, heavy woman—clutched him and dragged him under. We thought for a long time that Nona was dead too, but they brought her round, and after a few days she was as fit as ever.

"Well, she was in a mighty bad humour just then, for the man with whom she had lived had gone off with a ballet-dancer who had taken his fancy. I expect he had had enough of Nona's temper, and not being her legal husband he could quit if he liked. Nona was in a towering rage, for she had a sort of liking for the man, and she was just in the mood for mischief.

"'I wonder what that Keefe is doing?" she says to me one night when she came from the theatre. 'I expect by this time he is wild to marry again. I will have a bit of a joke with him, Bella,' says she, 'for I owe him a grudge,' and then and there she concocted the letter that I sent to Keefe, and made me copy it. It was a cruel

sort of joke; but Nona was always a bit malicious, and it was not the first trick she had played on him. 'What fun it will be,' she said, laughing fit to kill herself, 'if, when I go to England next year, I find him making love to another woman! "None of that sort of game, my fine gentleman," I will say. "I am your lawful wife."'"

"Good Lord!" groaned Jem. "Why, she was more a fiend than a woman!"

"No," returned Bella, "Nona had not a bad nature, only she made too free with the drink; and when she got into a rage she was neither to bind or to hold. But on her deathbed I think she was sorry for the trick.

"'When you see Keefe you can tell him that it was only a practical joke, but that I am sorry that I did it,' she said to me. But when Keefe angered me I clean forgot her message, and the devil tempted me to tell him that she was alive. Oh, we are a pair, Nona and me," concluded Bella in a deprecating voice. "Nona was the worst, but I pretty nearly came up to her."

"Mrs. O'Rourke," and Jem stood before her trembling from head to foot, "is this really the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"It is—it is, Miss Durnford. I will swear to it if you like. So help me——" But Jem's warning hand checked her.

"No, do not swear it. But surely you can give me some proofs. Did your sister die at New York?"

"No," returned Bella unhesitatingly. "We were on the move then. She fell ill at a village or town—they called it—Brouxville was the name. We were putting up for the night at a little tavern, as we had an engagement in a neighbouring town the following day; but in the morning she could not be moved, and they had to leave us behind. She was buried there, and I had her name put up on a wooden cross—'Nona Emmeline Desmond, aged forty-four.'"

"Eunice!" Jem spoke excitedly. "Have you a pencil that you could write this down?" And Eunice at once

produced a dainty little pocket-book, a parting gift from Lucia.

"If you write to Ebenezer Price at the Cross Roads Tavern, Brouxville, Dauphin County, he will let you know that I have told you the truth. Now my mouth's dry with talking, and I will not say another word." And Bella leaned back sullen and exhausted, just as Billy dashed up to them, strewing cowslips as he ran.

"Oh, Jemmy dear!" he panted, "I have dropped ever so many flowers, but my legs do ache so that I can't pick them up. And I would like some more milk, please." But the next minute his face lengthened, for lo and behold! the feast had vanished, and Billy's voice was as doleful as one of the seven little bears in the fairy tale. "Who has been drinking my milk?" he asked fretfully. Then Bella O'Rourke laughed.

"I am the culprit, little master," she said insinuatingly. "But there is plenty more milk for you at home; so don't you be grudging it to your poor auntie, Billy."

"Oh, he is a pretty fellow," in a coaxing aside; "but he is not a bit like Nona. I am your Auntie Bella, ducky. You will shake hands with me, won't you, Bill?" But Billy frowned at her over Jem's shoulder.

"I haven't got any aunties," he said peevishly. "Who is that woman, Jemmy? Send her away. She didn't ought to have drunk my milk."

"Hush, darling," whispered Jem. And Bella laughed again in a somewhat disagreeable fashion.

"He is a chip of the old block, Miss Durnford. There is a look of Keefe about him after all. You should not be a greedy little boy, Bill; you ain't kind to your Aunt Bella, who took care of you as a baby." But Billy fairly stamped.

"I ain't got no aunties, I tell you. Oh, Jemmy, do make her go away! I don't like a beggar woman." But at this awkward moment carriage wheels were distinctly audible. Jem rose with alacrity.

"There's Compton come to fetch us. Billy, love, just

help Eunice pack the tea-basket while I speak to Mrs. O'Rourke." And then Jem beckoned the woman aside.

"We are going home now, and I shall not see you again. If I give you some money, will you tell me what you propose to do?"

"I will tell you that right enough, Miss Durnford, for you are a good soul after all, though you did speak a bit rough at first. I ain't the woman I was, and I am fairly sick of tramping. I am so footsore, that I shall be glad to get a night's lodging at the inn here. If I show them money they would take me in."

"And to-morrow?"

"Well, to-morrow I would make my way to London. The manager of the Empire Theatre, down Shadwell way, is a friend of mine. Tipton is a good sort of fellow, and so is his wife. She is the leading lady at the Empire. Tipton always promised to take me on if I gave up the drink and kept steady. He thinks a deal of my acting. He says I suit him down to the ground. When I was playing at the Empire I used to lodge with the Tiptons. Peg Tipton and I are regular chums."

"You think you will find employment with him?"

"I am as sure of it as my name is Bella O'Rourke." And Bella drew herself up with a grand air. "I am just the person for the Empire. I can do the comic and tragic parts equally well."

"I have only three pounds in my purse," returned Jem hurriedly, interrupting these stage confidences; "if you will give me your London address I will send you five pounds more."

"Make it ten, my dear creature," pleaded the woman in a wheedling tone. "You see, I have been so long in Queer Street that I am rather at a low ebb; I have only these clothes to my back, and Tipton likes his ladies to have a good appearance, and I shan't draw a cent of salary for a fortnight or so."

"Very well," returned Jem, who was only anxious to be rid of her, "remember you have no further claim on

me, and it is not likely that Keefe will do anything for you after the trick you have played him."

"I know that," returned Bella sullenly. "Well, thank you, Miss Durnford, you have treated me better than I deserved, and I won't forget it in a hurry. I will let you have my address when I get to London, and you will send me the two fivers."

Jem nodded and turned away; she was longing to be alone with Eunice, and to plan what was to be done next; but it was impossible to talk before Billy. The boy was fractious with fatigue, and extremely troublesome; it needed some effort on Jem's part to bear with him, but she would not allow Eunice to scold him.

"Billy does not mean to be naughty," she said gently, "he is over-tired and excited, but Susan shall put him to bed when we get home."

"I don't want to go to bed," returned Billy fretfully, "I want to sit up and have supper with my Jemmy, I do." But for once Jem was inexorable, and in spite of tears and entreaties Susan carried him off.

"For shame, Master Bill," observed Susan sternly, "to think of your behaving in this way when Miss Jem has given you such a treat; you deserve a sound whipping, that you do," and Billy was so astonished at this unusual treatment, that he ceased to roar.

Meanwhile Jem had shut herself in the morning-room with Eunice, and was anxiously discussing the whole matter.

"I am so upset that I hardly know what I am about," she observed in a troubled tone. "Do you suppose Mrs. O'Rourke was really telling us the truth, Eunice? One minute I believed her, and the next I made up my mind that she was inventing the story just to get money out of me, until at last I hardly knew whether I was standing on my head or heels."

"I am sure she was telling us the truth, dear."

"Then I must send a telegram to Keefe at once; no, it will be too late this evening, but we will get the form

ready and send it to-morrow. It would be best for one of us to take it, for Andrew might chatter;" and then after a good deal of consideration the telegram was written:

"Go to Ebenezer Price, Cross Roads Tavern, Brouxville, Dauphin County, you will get all information—Durnford." And as soon as the telegraph-office was open the next morning, Eunice sent it off.

They had hoped for an immediate reply, but none came; and Jem got so restless and fidgety that when three days had elapsed she sent another, answer prepaid, to the hotel, and soon had a reply: "Mr. Desmond left New York before telegram arrived. No address."

"Whatever does that mean, Eunice?" asked Jem in a frightened tone, but the girl soon pacified her.

It was evident that Mr. Desmond had found some fresh clue, and had started off very suddenly; he would write to them, of course, and Miss Jem would have the letter in a few days. And Eunice was right.

Keefe wrote very hastily. Two women, answering to the description of Nona and her sister, were supposed to be living in Philadelphia, and he had set off with a detective. The women had been found after much searching, and had proved to be a mother and daughter of the name of Robinson; they were dark, swarthy women, and rather handsome, and the daughter was an actress. Keefe wrote in the same desponding manner; he had caught cold and was out of sorts, and he meant to stay at Philadelphia until he felt better. There was a hasty comparison of dates, and then Eunice suggested that the old telegram should be sent to Philadelphia.

"I expect he is there still, but even if he has left, he will find it at New York;" and Eunice was right, for the next day they received a message:

"Off to Brouxville, will telegraph from there if possible."

Two more days of waiting and enforced patience, and then Keefe's telegram set their minds at rest:

"Seen Price—read inscription—all quite true—shall take next steamer home."

Jem was a little hysterical when she read this. "Oh, thank God," she murmured, "I shall have my Keefe back in less than a fortnight!" and Jem smiled blissfully through her tears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ON THE HIGHWAY OF FATE

Oh, what is that in heaven where grey cloud-flakes are seven,
Where blackest clouds hang riven just at the rainy skirt?
Oh, that's a meteor sent us, a message dumb, portentous,
An undeciphered solemn signal of help or hurt!

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

WHEN Jem had grown calmer, Eunice pointed out to her that the telegram had been sent from Pierrepont, which was evidently the town near Brouxville which Mrs. O'Rourke had mentioned.

"Mr. Desmond could only have just started on his return journey," she continued, "and probably three or four days would elapse before he left New York, so it would be impossible for him to be here for a fortnight at least."

"Yes, I see; I daresay you are right, Eunice," and Jem heaved a wistful sigh. "It is downright wrong of me to be so impatient when things are turning out so well for me and Keefe; but I am so longing to have him back, and to make up to him for everything, that even a day or two's delay seems more than I can bear;" and a soft, yearning look came into Jem's blue eyes as she spoke.

Jem was very sweet and humble in her happiness, and touchingly anxious to make up to her friends for her long neglect of them.

Two or three days later she went to Chez-Nous, leaving Billy in Eunice's charge, and came back all the better for the little change.

"I never saw Araby in better looks," she said, when Eunice questioned her. "I never thought her pretty

before, but she had such a colour and seemed in such spirits. She showed me Douglas's present, a diamond pendant, such a beauty; Araby told me it had been Mrs. Hilton's and he had had it reset; and he had given her a ring too, pink coral and diamonds. She has heaps of presents. I did not see a quarter of them, but they are all to be set out in the billiard-room on the wedding day."

Eunice nodded; she had heard all this before.

"Mrs. Pater was in a bit of a fuss, though," went on Jem, "and I must own it is a disappointment. Major Ford has had a tiresome sort of accident, twisted or dislocated his ankle, and he is still at New York. I expect from Araby's account that he and Keefe will come in the same steamer, but anyhow he will just be too late for the wedding."

"Oh dear, what a pity!" observed Eunice. "Araby will be disappointed too, she was so against this trip to America. She and Major Ford are such friends."

"Yes, Mrs. Pater was quite low about it, but we managed to cheer her up between us. Well, I never enjoyed a visit to Chez-Nous more than I have this afternoon, for they were both as nice as possible and asked so kindly after Keefe; wasn't I proud to tell them that we were expecting him back by the next steamer! Mrs. Tina opened her eyes at that. I tell you what, Eunice, if it is a fine day to-morrow we will drive over to Monkbarn. I have not been there for ages, and Lilian will be so glad to see us."

Eunice rather demurred to this. "Are you sure that we shall not be in the way?" she asked; "to-morrow is Saturday, and Wednesday is the wedding, they are sure to be very much taken up;" but Jem negatived this. Lilian was always beforehand, everything would be done, and she knew for certain that she was not coming over to Chez-Nous before Monday.

Jem was so bent on carrying out her intention that Eunice did not venture to say more. If she could only

have invented some plausible excuse for not accompanying her; but the next moment she chid herself for selfishness.

"What does it matter?" she said to herself. "Douglas Hilton is nothing to me now. Why should I fear to meet him? We shall always be good friends, I hope. Surely I am not so mean as to envy another woman's happiness. Araby has the best of rights to him, for she has loved him for years."

So Eunice put a good face on it. Indeed, she would have been ashamed to do otherwise. Nevertheless, her heart sank a little as they drove through the old gateway. Never had Monkbarn looked more beautiful than it did that June afternoon.

Lilian came out in the porch and greeted them cordially.

To the secret relief of one of her auditors, she told them that she was glad of their society, as she was all alone. Douglas had been obliged to go to Shelgate, and would not be back until supper-time.

"He will be so sorry to miss you both," she continued. "But he will see you on Wednesday." And then Lilian proposed that while they were waiting for tea she should show them the newly furnished rooms for the bride; and as Jem eagerly assented to this, she took them up at once.

Everything had been done in accordance with Araby's taste, and no money or pains had been spared. The sitting-room was charming. Jem quite gasped with admiration when she saw it.

"Why, it is fit for a queen," she said. "However has Douglas managed to think of everything? There is my piano, Eunice; it was a good thought of yours having it sent straight here, and it looks as well as possible."

"That it does," returned Lilian heartily. "It is a perfect beauty, and Douglas and Araby are so delighted with it. But Douglas means to scold you for spending all that money on him. You ought not to have done it, dear Miss Jem, for we have no sort of claim on you."

"Stuff and nonsense," returned Jem, highly delighted with the reception of her splendid gift. "I will do as much for you one day, Lilian." But the girl shook her head with a smile.

"Never, dear Miss Jem," she said firmly. "I am a predestined old maid." And then she opened the escritoire and showed them the dainty fittings. "Douglas thinks nothing can be too pretty for Araby," she finished quietly. Eunice winced as she heard the little speech, but it did her good. In certain wounds the lancet is certainly efficacious.

Lilian entertained them in her old hospitable manner. but she was rather grave and not in her usual spirits. "The heart knoweth her own bitterness," said the wisest of men, and perhaps even Lilian's unselfishness found the changes hard to bear. But she made no complaint. Only when at parting Jem made some allusion to Wednesday, a sudden flush crossed the girl's face. "How time flies!" she said in a regretful tone, "only three days more! I can hardly realise that I shall only have Douglas to myself for three whole days." And Eunice, who was close to her, saw a sudden film of tears in Lilian's eyes. Perhaps Jem noticed it too, for she said in rather a pitying tone as they drove off:

"I am downright sorry for Lilian. She is a brave little soul and makes no fuss, but she will feel the change terribly. She has so long been first with Douglas. And then Araby is the sort of person who will stand on her rights, and be as tenacious of them as possible. If it had been any one else. But there, it is no good crying over spilt milk." Nevertheless, Jem was a little silent and preoccupied all the way home. Perhaps that pained look on her favourite's face troubled her kind heart.

"There is a telegram for you, Miss Cleveland," observed Rachel, as Eunice stepped out of the carriage.

"For me! Are you quite sure, Rachel?" Eunice's voice was rather perturbed. Her weekly letter from home was unusually late. Perhaps Lucia or one of the

children was ill, but unless it were serious Shirley would never have sent her a telegram.

She was quite afraid of opening it, and stood for a moment with the yellow envelope still closed in her hand. Miss Jem, who had not heard Rachel's remark, was holding an animated discussion with Compton about some stable repairs, and did not follow her for some moments.

"It has been here ever since three o'clock," observed Rachel, and then Eunice opened the telegram. The next moment she uttered an exclamation that brought Rachel to her side.

"Whatever is it, miss?" she asked anxiously, for the girl had turned suddenly pale.

"Oh, don't ask me! Susan, I want Susan. I must go to her," and Eunice rushed upstairs as though she were distracted.

Susan was just coming out of her mistress's room, and quite started at the girl's face.

"Why, what's to do, missy?" she exclaimed, but she was still further mystified when Eunice took her by the arm and drew her into her own room, shut the door and locked it.

"Read that," she panted, thrusting the telegram into Susan's hand, "and tell me what we are to do."

There was reason for Eunice's strange excitement, for the message was as follows: "Sad accident—Keefe Desmond fatally injured—saw him die—full particulars in papers—will write—break gently Miss Durnford—Ford." The telegram was from New York.

"Mercy upon us! Good Lord deliver us!" gasped Susan, her terrified face almost matching her cap-strings. "Why, it will most kill my mistress!"

"I can't believe it, Susan. I have read it three times. Saw him die—Keefe Desmond dead—Major Ford! Oh no; impossible!" and Eunice's voice was quite shrill with terror. But they both recoiled when some one tapped at the door and then tried the handle.

"Whatever are you two doing?" demanded Jem's voice

impatiently, "and why have you locked yourselves in? Rachel says there was a telegram." Then Susan made a hasty sign to Eunice to hide the paper as she unlocked the door.

Jem marched in in rather an injured manner. "If anything is the matter, I should have thought you would have told me before Susan," she began querulously; but her manner changed when she saw their faces. There had been no time for preparation, and those white, panic-stricken countenances told their own tale.

"Something has happened, Eunice. I don't mean to be cross, but why don't you speak? Is there anything wrong at the End House?"

"No," returned the girl faintly. "As far as I know, they are all well."

"Who sent the telegram, then, and what is it about? Does it concern me? Oh, I thought so," a grey tinge coming over her face as she spoke. "And it has to do with Keefe. Let me see it. How dare you hide anything from me if it concerns him?" But Eunice still kept the crumpled paper in her hand, holding it in a vice as she looked at Susan for help.

"Let her have it, missy," returned the elder woman. "There is no keeping it from her, if it is true. There is bad news, Miss Jem, darling; you must summon up your courage, my lamb, for it is God's will and we must not rebel." But it was doubtful whether Jem heard her. She flung impatiently from the arm that the faithful creature had put round her as though for support, and stood erect as men do when they expect the death-shot, smoothing out the crumpled paper as she read it.

They watched her breathlessly. But there was no sound from Jem's lips as she read the awful tidings. It was as though her wound bled inwardly.

"She is stunned, Miss Eunice. She does not take it in," murmured Susan with streaming eyes. "Oh, my poor dearie, don't stand there like a stone image, you will

break my heart." Then Jem raised her head with a ghastly smile.

"Don't I understand?" she said, in a voice that was strange to their ears. "Don't I know that my Keefe is dead, that he will never come back to me and Billy! Oh, my God, never, never!" and Jem staggered and threw up her arms. She would have fallen in that sudden dizziness that seemed to cloud her brain, only Susan caught her in her strong arms, and laid her on Eunice's bed as though she were an infant.

But Jem had not fainted; only for the time her strength had failed her. Eunice shuddered as she saw the anguish in her eyes. Then a cold, nerveless hand touched her.

"Go—go—I must be alone; go, both of you. Yes, yes, I mean it."

"We must do as she tells us," whispered Susan, as she drew a light coverlet over the prostrate form, and then motioned Eunice to follow her, but the girl obeyed her reluctantly.

"Oh, Susan, we cannot leave her like this; she looks dreadful," she remonstrated. "One of us ought to stay with her," but Susan shook her head.

"Don't you be afraid, missy, she will take no hurt by being alone for a bit. If we were to cross her we should only send her into hysterics. I shall just stop outside, and by and by I will creep in again. You leave her to me, Miss Cleveland, my dear, for when she is in trouble it is her old Susan she wants. Didn't I nurse her from a baby? and now, that I should live to see this day!" and Susan sat down on the bench outside the door and rocked herself in her old manner.

"Is there nothing I can do?" asked Eunice tearfully. "Do you think any one could help us—Captain Pater, or Dr. Hilliard, or Mr. Hilton?" hesitating over the last name.

"There's nought that any one can do," returned Susan hopelessly. "It is the visitation of God; that is what it is, my dear, and we can none of us help her to bear this

bitter blow. He is dead, poor fellow, and Miss Jem will grieve for him as though she were his widow. Oh, my lamb," and Susan spoke in the saddest voice, "to think I made that speech about the wedding dress! I would rather have bitten my tongue out than have done it, Miss Jem, my dear."

"Don't, Susan," with a little shiver at the recollection, "it only makes things worse. Why could not Major Ford have said more? New York. It must have been a railway accident, and they were together, for he saw him die. Oh, if to-morrow were not Sunday! how are we to wait for the papers to know how it all happened?"

"Hush, my dear, speak lower, or she will hear you. There was nothing in to-day's paper, for I was reading it this afternoon. We shall be forced to wait; and, after all, what does it matter? His Heavenly Father has taken him, and he has got nothing more to suffer. We can only pray for her that she may be strengthened to drink the bitter cup," and Susan finished with a sob.

No, there was nothing to be done, except to tell the household what had occurred, and to beg Dorcas to take charge of Billy and to keep the news from him. And, after a short interview with Mrs. Compton and Rachel, Eunice wandered aimlessly about the house, too utterly unnerved and wretched to settle to anything. Susan had gone back to her mistress, and, as Eunice paced the corridor in her restlessness, more than once she could hear a faint murmur of voices. The summer twilight was just deepening into darkness when Rachel came up to tell her that Captain Pater was below, and had asked to see Miss Cleveland. Eunice went down to him at once. As he greeted her she saw by his face that the news had reached him.

"My wife begged me to come round. She and Araby are so unhappy about Miss Durnford. They could not rest until they knew how she was."

"I can hardly tell you how she is, Captain Pater," replied Eunice sadly. "Susan is with her now, but she

would not let me stay. When I left her she looked very ill."

"Floris would have come to her at once, but she was sure Miss Durnford would rather be alone. If you think she would be of any use I would bring her round." Captain Pater spoke with grave sympathy.

"Oh no, thank you," returned Eunice gratefully. "Mrs. Pater is very kind, but Miss Jem will be better alone. The shock has been so dreadful, it is difficult for any one to realise it, but I suppose it is true."

"Without doubt," was the reply. "Perhaps you do not know, Miss Cleveland, that Cecil Ford has telegraphed to us also."

"Has he told you more?" asked Eunice anxiously. "Ours is so vague," and then she repeated to him the contents of Major Ford's telegram. "Do you suppose it was a railway accident, Captain Pater?"

"No," he returned quickly. "You had better read Cecil's telegram yourself, Miss Cleveland," and he handed her the paper.

"Broadlands Hotel burnt to the ground. Am safe—Desmond killed—jumped from window—concussion brain—take next steamer." Eunice handed it back without a word. She was very white.

"He would not suffer," observed Captain Pater kindly. "It was better than being burnt. Death would be instantaneous, or nearly so. We shall know more when the papers come in; and when Cecil arrives he will tell us all."

But Eunice remained silent. She was thinking how strange it was that those two men should have crossed each other's path again, and that Cecil Ford should be the witness of Keefe Desmond's death.

CHAPTER XXXIX

ONE OF LIFE'S ENIGMAS

One cried: "How long? yet founded on the Rock
She shall do battle, suffer, and attain"—
One answered: "Faith quakes in the tempest shock:
Strengthen her soul again."

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

CAPTAIN PATER did not stay long, but before he left he repeated his offer of help.

"If there be anything that we can do, you have only to send a message, and either my wife or I will come at once. We are your nearest neighbours, please remember that, Miss Cleveland."

"Oh yes, thank you, and I will promise to let you know if we need help," returned Eunice gratefully. "It was so good of you to come, Captain Pater." His kind sympathy had cheered her a little. As she closed the door she told herself that Captain Pater was a man whom she could rely on implicitly—who would be better than his word—a true friend in adversity.

"Ian always likes people who are sick or sorry," his wife had said once in her hearing. "He is a tower of strength when people are in trouble." Eunice could quite believe it this evening. He had said little, and yet he had left her somewhat comforted.

To her surprise Susan was on the watch for her at the head of the staircase.

"Has he gone?" she asked anxiously. "Miss Jem heard the bell, and sent me down to see who it was coming at this time of night. You must go to her, Miss Cleveland, my dear. She's got it into her head that there's further news, and she won't rest until she has seen you."

"But, Susan, it is even worse than we thought;" and

Eunice told her the contents of the telegram that had been sent to Chez-Nous.

"I don't see it is so much worse," returned Susan with a sigh, "and it is better for her to know the truth. She has got it into her head that it was a railway accident, and nothing could be more shocking than that. You are bound to tell her, for she knows the Captain has been here."

Then Eunice summoned up her courage to enter the room. Jem was lying in the same position, only Susan had raised her on the pillows and settled her a little more comfortably. Her hair lay damp and uncurled on her forehead, and there was a drawn, grey look on her face; but her eyes—Eunice shivered as she saw their expression. They reminded her of a dying baby's whom she had seen once. For some reason Shirley had asked her to go with him, but the sight had unnerved her, and she had been quite useless. Those baby eyes, so languid and suffering, seemed to appeal to her for help. "Oh, why must the good and the innocent always suffer?" thought the girl rebelliously, as she knelt down by the bed and pressed her lips to the cold hand, but there was no response to her caress.

"The Captain has been, Eunice?" Jem's voice sounded hollow and lifeless. "What has he been telling you?"

"He came to inquire after you, dear. He said his wife had sent him, they were so anxious about you."

"Then the Major must have sent them a telegram too, and of course he has told them more."

"Very little more," in a hesitating voice. "One cannot say much, you know, in a telegram."

"You need not be afraid of telling me; nothing can harm me now." Jem spoke in the same dull, unnatural tone. "Was it on the railway, Eunice?"

"No, dearest, but it was quite as terrible. The Broadlands Hotel, where they must both have been staying, was on fire, and he—he——"

"Oh, my God, not that!" and Jem started up from her

pillows with a face like death itself, "not that for my darling!"

"No, no," throwing her arms round her, "the fire did not touch him, but he jumped from a window and struck his head—concussion of the brain—that is what the telegram said. Captain Pater told me that it must have been instantaneous death."

"Thank God at least for that!" and Jem sank back shuddering all over. "Struck his dear head! oh, my darling, my darling! but it was soon over," and a dry sob rose to Jem's throat. Her face was hidden on the pillow now, and she took no further notice of Eunice.

"Don't talk to her any more," whispered Susan, "she's got what she wanted, and you can do nothing more for her. You leave her to me, dearie, I am going to get her to her own room presently. Billy is there, and she will like to be near him." Then Eunice reluctantly left the room, but Susan, touched by the girl's evident unhappiness, followed her.

"You won't mind leaving her to me, Miss Cleveland, my dear," rather anxiously, "for I am getting an old woman, and I understand her best. I don't mean to lose sight of her to-night; I shall make believe to lie down on the couch and close my eyes, but I shan't sleep a wink. You go downstairs and take some supper, and Rachel shall tell you when your room is ready; and you'll say a prayer for her, won't you, my dear?" Then Eunice threw her arms round the old servant's neck, and kissed her.

"Dear Susan, yes, and for you too, you good faithful soul; there, I must not keep you," and Eunice went down to her lonely meal, and tried to eat, though every mouthful seemed to choke her. Rachel waited on her with silent assiduity, and even Mrs. Compton came in to wish her good-night, and upstairs Dorcas was still lingering, although it was late, to render her any assistance. "Susan told me to let you know, miss," she said in a subdued voice, for all the servants were full of sympathy

for their mistress, "that Miss Durnford is pretty comfortable now, and has taken a few spoonfuls of beef-tea, and she sent her love, Susan says, and you are not to trouble about her, for Susan will take good care of her."

Eunice's eyes filled with tears; it was so like Jem to send her that message. Even in her cruel anguish and bereavement she could remember her; and when Eunice knelt down that night she prayed for poor Jem as she had never prayed for herself, and then she lay down in the moonlight and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

The night was far more trying for Susan; and, tough and seasoned as she was, it taxed her endurance heavily. Jem could not sleep; she lay awake in wide-eyed misery, picturing the terrible scene, the smoke, the flames, the hissing of the engines, the fiery serpents rearing their fearful heads, the blazing rafters, the heat as of another Inferno. Had he been roused from sleep? had they shouted to him that there was no escape, that the ladders could not reach him? and had he thrown himself out in desperation? She could hear the dreadful thud as his head touched the stone; and here Jem moaned, and the cold sweat was on her forehead. At the sound Susan rose from the couch and took her in her pitying arms. "Don't think of it, my lamb," she said soothingly, "it is all over now, the fire never touched him; it was just a blow, Miss Jem. Take comfort that it was so sudden, my precious, and that he has nothing more to suffer."

"Nothing more to suffer," echoed Jem; but her eyes had still a strained look in them. "Are you sure of that, Susan? Keefe was not always a good man; he broke his father's heart, he never got over that. He was not what you call religious, but he never pretended, and he said he always meant to go to church with me. Oh, I am certain that he tried to be good, he used to ask me to help him."

"And you did help him, dearie; don't you be afraid, Miss Jem, his Maker would not have taken him away so

sudden if he were not ready. Do you suppose he did not call for help when he was in the fiery furnace, as the poor dying thief did on the cross? They have both the same Saviour, Miss Jem, and His ear is never closed to the lost sheep that call upon Him." Then as Jem listened to these homely words of comfort her anguish was relieved, but before an hour was over Susan had to say it all over again.

The shock had been too sudden and the revulsion too great; Jem's feverish restlessness seemed beyond her own control.

Once when Susan, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, had fallen into a brief doze, she woke up to find that Jem had left her bed, and was kneeling beside Billy, who was sleeping peacefully and smiling in some childish dream. Jem's face was pressed against his pillow, and a broken sentence or two reached Susan. "My boy for ever now; Keefe said so. He gave you to me, I must be father and mother too. Oh, Billy, what are we to do without him?" and then again came that dreary, heartbroken moan. It was only with difficulty that Susan could get her back to her bed, but after that she was quieter. When morning came, Susan gave Eunice her report of the night. "I think it would be best to send for Dr. Hilliard," she said; "Miss Jem has not slept for a single moment; and now she can hardly speak for the pain in her head, and she can't swallow a drop of tea this morning, she is so deadly sick. If you will write a line, Miss Cleveland, my dear, I will just send Andrew off with it."

"Very well," returned Eunice, sitting down to the writing-table; "what am I to tell him, Susan?"

"Oh, you need not say much; only that Miss Jem has had a shock, and that she can't get any sleep, and that you would be glad if he would come and see her." Susan waited until the note was written; she was looking worn and old after her night's watching, but she made no complaint of her weariness.

It was a miserable Sunday to Eunice, and yet it was

not without its alleviations. While she was at breakfast a servant from Chez-Nous brought her a kind little note from Mrs. Pater, to which she had to reply; then Dr. Hilliard came, and was a long time upstairs. Eunice did not venture to intercept him, as he was sure to say everything to Susan, and he had not asked for her. Susan came downstairs with him and let him out.

"I am glad we sent for him, Miss Cleveland," she observed, when Eunice waylaid her; "I can see by his manner that the doctor thinks Miss Jem but poorly, and needing a deal of care.

"We are to keep her quiet and not force her to speak, unless she seems inclined, and he won't hear of any one going near her but you and me," here the girl's face brightened. "He read the telegram; Miss Jem handed it to him, and he says it is no wonder it has knocked her over. He was as gentle with her as though she were a sick child; he will send her something to relieve her head, and she is to have a composing draught to-night, and then she will get some sleep."

Eunice crept into the room after this, but the window had been darkened, and Jem's pale face was hardly visible. She was evidently in great pain.

"I can't talk," she said faintly; "you will look after Billy, won't you, Eunice? I must just lie here, Dr. Hilliard says."

"You would not like me to read a few verses or a Psalm?"

Then Jem's white lips quivered. "Not till my head is better, thank you. I have been trying to say those words, dear, 'Thy will, not mine, be done,' but I don't seem as though I can say it." And Jem moved restlessly and turned her face to the wall, and then Susan came in and gave Eunice a sign to leave the room.

Dorcas had taken Billy out, so Eunice went into the garden with her prayer-book; but before she was half through the first lesson, she saw Lilian coming up the drive, and ran across the tennis-lawn to meet her. When

they had embraced each other, Lilian looked at her sadly; for the moment she seemed to find it difficult to speak. "I have only just heard it, Eunice."

"Do you mean that the Paters actually sent all the way to Medfield?" in a surprised voice.

"No, no, of course not. Douglas wanted to consult Captain Pater about something, so he proposed we should drive over to Chez-Nous, and go to the minster in the afternoon, and then they told us." Lilian did not add how reluctantly she had acceded to this proposition, as she had counted on spending the last Sunday at Monkbarn.

"And you saw them all?"

"No, only Araby and Captain Pater. Mrs. Pater was in bed with a sick headache. She is terribly upset; you see, her brother was in the same peril."

"I never realised that," returned Eunice, a little shocked at her own thoughtlessness. "Let us sit down, Lilian dear, you look so pale and tired."

"Of course the news has upset us, it is so horrible, so awfully tragic," and Lilian shuddered.

"Eunice, I am afraid to ask how Miss Jem has taken it?"

"She nearly fainted when she read the telegram, not quite, and, Susan says, she has had no sleep. You must not see her. Dr. Hilliard says that after such a shock we cannot keep her too quiet."

"I can understand that. What a mystery life is, Eunice! to think of such a bitter trial coming to our dear Miss Jem!" and Lilian sighed heavily.

"Does it not seem cruel? though I suppose we ought not to say so. Do you think she will ever get over it?"

"To be sure she will; it is not in human nature to suffer for ever."

"But she worshipped him, Lilian. I never saw any woman so infatuated."

"Yes, I know, we could all see that; it is a dark cloud, Eunice, and at present we can only see its blackness; but

you may depend upon it that it has its silver lining," and Lilian softly repeated Cowper's lines:

> "Behind a frowning Providence,
> He hides a smiling face.

We must try and believe that." Lilian would have found it difficult to express her meaning more fully; but she had a vague feeling that the bitterness was tempered with mercy. What if Keefe Desmond should have lived to disappoint that fond, trusting heart! Was it not far better for Jem to lose him even in this awful manner, than to drag out existence as an unloved wife? And with all his sense of gratitude, would he really have loved her?

This question could never be answered now; the man's weak nature would never know the bitterness of temptation again; the sheep that had wandered in such weary paths was now, as Susan had said, in the care of the Good Shepherd.

There was an interval of silence, which Lilian was the first to break.

"What a comfort it is to know that she has Billy!"

"But he will not make up to her, Lilian."

"No, perhaps not; but by and by he will be her one object in life. She will cherish and love him for his father's sake, and then for his own. Believe me, Eunice, that that child will be her greatest consolation and blessing, and that we may yet live to see Miss Jem a happy woman. God grant it!" and Lilian's eyes filled with tears.

After this they talked quietly together, and then Lilian said that it was time for her to go; and then they walked hand in hand to the gate, while the wood-doves cooed in the branches over their head.

"Dear Lilian, you have been such a comfort to me! When shall I see you again?"

"Not until after Wednesday," was the answer; "but I will come as soon as I can."

"Please do," but Eunice had changed colour at the mention of Wednesday. "Lilian, you must give my love to Araby; you know I shall not be with her on that day, but I shall be thinking of you all." She said it bravely, and without effort, but her heart was heavy as lead as she walked back to the house. "In the midst of life we are in death," she thought. "Chez-Nous the house of feasting and the Dene the house of mourning;" and then she crept softly upstairs to hear the welcome tidings that the pain had abated, and that Jem was asleep.

CHAPTER XL

THROUGH PAIN TO PEACE

Although to-day He prunes my twigs with pain,
  Yet doth His blood nourish and warm my root:
To-morrow I shall put forth buds again,
  And clothe myself with fruit.

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

FOR some days Jem was very ill, and Dr. Hilliard gave stringent orders that no one was to be admitted. He also insisted that Billy should sleep in another room, as his least movement disturbed her. Jem was too weak to resist, but her nurses noticed how wistfully her eyes rested on the little empty bed; but when Eunice once asked her if she were unhappy without him, Jem shook her head. "He is best away from me just now," she returned sadly.

Eunice always spoke to the doctor now when he came down from the sick-room; he generally gave a cheering account of the patient.

"Miss Durnford is doing as well as we can expect after such a shock," he said once. "It is an attack of the nerves, and we must give nature time to work. Perfect quiet and frequent nourishment, that is what I tell Susan. That woman is a treasure, Miss Cleveland, she is worth her weight in gold. You leave Miss Durnford to her, and we shall soon have her about again."

Eunice had a long talk with Susan after this, while Jem was asleep. Susan fully corroborated the doctor's words.

"He is quite right, Miss Cleveland, my dear. Miss Jem's illness is more mental than bodily, though for the

matter of that she is just as weak as a child. You see, she was not in the state to bear such a shock; she had had some trouble or worry dragging her down for weeks and weeks. Oh, I know my place, and I have asked no questions, but I have my own thoughts for all that; and many a time I have said to myself when I heard her moaning so pitifully in her sleep, 'Maybe the Lord knows best what He is doing, and the trouble sent may be a blessing in disguise.'"

"If one could only believe it," returned Eunice thoughtfully.

"We are bound to believe it, my dear, or we should be worse than heathen; take my word for it, Miss Jem will come round all right; but as the doctor says, we must give her time. There's no one who knows her through and through as her old Susan does. Miss Jem has a brave heart, and she is too good and true to go pining through life because the Almighty has taken away her treasure. She would be the first to cry shame on herself, though she needs our prayers now, when she has not the strength to pray for herself," and a tear slowly rolled down Susan's face as she spoke.

It was a sad and trying time to Eunice, but she did her duty bravely. She sat in the shady Wilderness all the morning working or writing letters, while Billy played beside her; and in the afternoon or evening she relieved Susan for an hour or two.

She was sitting in the sick-room on Wednesday afternoon, when she was startled by a question from Jem, for she had thought she was asleep.

"Isn't this Araby's wedding-day, Eunice?"

"Yes, dear, they must be back at Chez-Nous by this time."

"And she is Douglas's wife! Well, God bless them both!" and Jem turned on her pillow with a weary sigh. If it were wetted with her tears, Eunice did not know it. Jem said no more, and the girl sat in troubled silence, with her hands folded on her lap, thinking of the happy

bride leaning on her husband's arm, as they came out of church in the June sunshine.

Lilian called the next day, and gave her a full account of the wedding. Everything had gone off well, and Araby had looked lovely, a perfect picture of a bride. Douglas had told her jestingly that she ought to be put in a glass case and enshrined for ever; and Araby had blushed so sweetly at her husband's compliment.

"Douglas really got through his part very well, Eunice," continued Lilian. "He was so nervous beforehand that I was quite anxious about him, but he behaved splendidly, and said just the right thing to everybody. One or two people thought he was rather too grave for a bridegroom, but Douglas feels things deeply, though he is so quiet outwardly, and I assure you that I was very proud of my brother."

Eunice was sorting some silks, and did not at once look up.

"And they have gone to Paris?" she asked after a moment's interval.

"Yes, but only for two or three days, and then they are going on to the Forest of Ardennes; but they are not to be long away. Douglas proposes to take another trip later in the year. Both he and Araby are anxious to settle at home quietly for the summer."

After this Lilian came over to Shepperton frequently, and her visits were bright spots in Eunice's day. She told Eunice that the Paters had gone to London to meet Major Ford, who was expected shortly, and that they hoped to bring him back with them. No letter had yet arrived from him. This was a relief to Eunice, as Miss Jem was not fit for further agitation.

Billy had been told of his father's death, and had fretted a good deal at first; but he was too young to fully realise it. After a time he became cheerful, and talked about poor daddy quite calmly.

"Susan says dad has gone to heaven, Clevy dear," he said once, "and that I must be a good boy and take care

of my Jemmy, and so I will. But I must be quick and grow up, or I shan't do it properly." And that day Billy learnt his lessons perfectly.

Jem mended slowly. By and by she lay on a couch by the open window watching Billy as he dragged his miller's-cart across the lawn, or stabled his horses under the firs. Sometimes she blew kisses to him or waved her thin hand as he called out to her joyously.

"Miss Jem is coming round finely," observed Susan one day. "She has been talking about her mourning, and she wants you to go up and write some letters for her, missy. She seemed fairly shocked at seeing Billy in his white sailor suit and blue collar. I declare I never gave it a thought until Miss Jem mentioned it." "Nor I," thought Eunice, feeling as though they were to blame; but when she went upstairs Jem never reproached her. She dictated the letter to the dressmaker in a feeble voice, and then told the girl that she had better take Billy to Shelgate the next day and get him everything needful.

When Jem first made her appearance downstairs, leaning on Susan's arm, she looked so changed in her deep mourning that Eunice could have cried over her.

Jem's high colour had faded, and she looked thin and white. As she glanced at the familiar surroundings her eyes were full of patient sadness, and she pressed her lips together as though in secret pain; but when Eunice put her arms round her and kissed her, a wan smile was Jem's only response.

"You let her bide quiet until she has had her tea," was Susan's wise counsel, and Eunice acted on this hint. She busied herself with some work at the farthest window, while Jem lay on her cushions with her hands covering her eyes, unable to move or speak in that trance of pain. It was in this room that she and Keefe had parted for ever in this world, when she had clung to him and told him that she could not bid him good-bye. "I cannot say it, Keefe!" she had sobbed. It seemed to her now

as though some presentiment had crossed her that she would see his face no more.

And then he had left her, and at the door she had caught hold of him again, and in the anguish of her soul had prayed him that he would come to her if only once again, and with what tender solemnity he had answered her. Would she ever forget those words? "If it be possible, I will surely come to you, even if we have only to wish each other good-bye." But it had not been possible, and she was lying there in her weakness and desolation.

Ah, no wonder that Jem was sad, and that she found it so difficult to respond to Billy's tumultuous caresses when he rushed in to find his dearest friend in her old place! It was then that he coined that new name for her that gladdened Jem's loving heart.

"It is my Jemmy, it is my dear, darling Mother Jem!" exclaimed Billy with a shout of joy. And from that day "Mother Jem" was his only name for her. Only, when he grew tall and strong it was "little Mother Jem."

Jem wept mingled tears of sorrow and gladness when she heard her new title, and pressed the boy closely to her.

"Always call me that, Billy," she whispered in his ear. "I will be mother to you as long as God spares me; and you will be my own dear child." And then Jem loosed her hold of him, and dried her eyes, and seemed more like her old self.

When Lilian came the next day, Jem expressed a wish to see her; but no one ever knew what passed between them. When Lilian came back to Eunice she looked rather grave and subdued.

"I have been a long time, dear, but Miss Jem wanted me to stay. I hope I have not tired her."

"Oh no! I expect you have done her good. Did you find her changed, Lilian?"

"Just at first, and then after a little she looked more natural; but she is not the old Miss Jem, somehow. Her face is altered; it looks refined, almost spiritualised—her

expression, I mean—as though trouble has purged away some of the dross. But, Eunice, she looks much older."

"Oh, I was afraid you would say that! Even Susan was groaning about it the other day."

"Then Susan was a foolish woman. What does it matter if one looks young or old? There is one thing I know, that Miss Jem will make a sweet old woman some day, and that is more than I can prophesy for myself. I often tell Douglas that such a brownie will only turn into a dried-up little fossil of a woman." But though Lilian spoke in this light way, her eyes were full of tears, for that long interview had tried her sorely.

That evening when Eunice was sitting with her, Jem said quietly, "Lilian tells me that the Captain and Mrs. Pater are coming home to-morrow, and that they are bringing the Major with them. I am going to send him a note and ask him to come round in the afternoon. I feel I must see him."

"Can I write the note for you, dear Miss Jem?"

"No. I had best do it myself; but you shall be with me when he comes, Eunice, for I haven't the courage of a mouse now, and I daren't see him alone." And then the note was written with difficulty, and sent round to Chez-Nous to await the Major's coming. The following evening Captain Pater brought round a verbal answer. Jem, who was still an invalid, had retired to her room, so he only saw Eunice. He told her that they had only arrived an hour ago, and that Major Ford would be with them at the hour Miss Durnford had mentioned.

"I wonder why he has never written to her as he promised?" asked Eunice.

"Oh, he begged me to explain that," returned Captain Pater. "It has troubled Cecil excessively. The letter was written to Miss Durnford, but by some carelessness on the part of the hotel servant it was not posted; and when he found it out it was useless to send it, as he intended to call at the Dene, and he and the letter would have arrived together."

Eunice was unfeignedly relieved to hear this. Then, after a few inquiries after Mrs. Pater and the newly married couple, Captain Pater took his leave.

At the appointed hour Major Ford was announced. The two ladies were sitting in the inner drawing-room at the window overlooking the Wilderness. As he came rather slowly towards them, they saw that he was leaning heavily on a crutch-like stick and seemed to walk with difficulty; and as Jem rose to greet him, he looked at her as though he hardly recognised her. He had always seen Jem Durnford in gay attire, and now the sombre black of her dress and her pale subdued aspect made her look like another woman.

"I am sorry to see you look but poorly, Major," were Jem's first words. "Araby told us of your accident, but I hoped you would have got over it by now."

"Oh, I am a bit lame still," he returned cheerfully; "but I get on very well with my stick. A few weeks ago I was on crutches, a regular cripple; but it is better to dislocate one's ankle than break one's neck, and it was nearly touch-and-go with me, I can tell you."

"It is a mercy you escaped," returned Jem in a subdued voice. "It is the one taken and the other left; but it is for some wise purpose, I suppose. Now, if you'll not be thinking me selfish, Major, you and I will get to our business, for there is a deal I want to know, and that only you can tell me." Jem spoke with tremulous eagerness, and her eyes wore a painful expression. "You'll not keep anything from me," she continued. "I must know everything—everything that has to do with my Keefe."

"My dear Miss Durnford, I quite understand. You shall know all that I do myself. But first let me tell you," and here Major Ford spoke with deep feeling, "that but for Keefe Desmond I should not be sitting beside you to-day."

Jem started and looked wistfully at him. "Whatever can you be meaning?" she murmured, and he could see she was trembling all over.

"It is true, my dear lady," he returned. "But let me tell you everything from the beginning. It will not take long;" and Jem nodded.

"I was staying at the Broadlands Hotel for a night," continued the Major, "for I had hoped to start for England by the steamer that was to leave the next day. Up to that date I had been paying a visit to a friend who lived a little way out of New York. But I had taken my leave of him that morning, as I had one or two business matters to settle before I went on board. I was out most of the day, but returned late in the afternoon, and when the gong sounded for dinner I was just following the crowd into the dining-saloon, when I found myself blocked up in the doorway with two or three Germans who were elbowing me rather roughly. The next moment a voice behind me that I seemed to recognise remonstrated with them, and as I turned I found myself face to face with Keefe Desmond. There were only two vacant places at the table. The next instant we had taken them, and I was thanking him for reprimanding the unmannerly Teutons." Here Major Ford broke off rather suddenly, as he met Jem's imploring gaze.

"I could not help stopping you, Major," observed Jem with a quivering lip. "You must please tell me how he looked."

"He was thinner and paler than when I saw him last, and seemed very tired. I remember I asked him if he had been ill; but he said no, he had only had a good deal of worry, and was very much fatigued. 'I have led the life of the Wandering Jew lately,' he observed. But he spoke quite cheerily. Indeed, I was quite struck with the brightness of his expression."

"And you were friendly together, Major?" asked Jem anxiously. She was hanging on his words as though each one was priceless. Jem's calmness amazed Eunice. She had been dreading this interview. She had feared that she would break down, and that there would be another painful scene. She little knew that Jem had

lived for this day; that her one thought was that Major Ford would tell her about Keefe; that she had nerved herself to hear every terrible detail from the man who saw him die.

When Jem asked her question, Eunice looked at the Major rather curiously.

"I am not surprised to hear you ask that," he returned quietly, "for we were a bit stiff and stand-offish at the Dene; but I had heard the news of your engagement from my sister, and I felt bound to be civil to him. I think Desmond seemed a little surprised at my friendliness, but he met me half-way. I am glad from my heart —I am glad that I did not say a word that evening that could have given him pain;" and here Cecil Ford sighed as though some memory oppressed him.

"God bless you, Major! I am thankful, that I am, to hear you say that." But Jem's voice was a little choked.

"We went into the smoking-room after that, and he told me about the story that Mrs. O'Rourke had fabricated; of his long and fruitless search; and how he feared in his heart that the wretched woman was still alive. 'I hadn't a moment's peace,' he observed, 'until I stood by her grave and knew that she would never trouble me again. I give you my word, Ford, I could have sat down on the grass and cried like a child at the thought that I was a free man again. It is terrible to think that a woman should live to be her husband's curse, but Nona was that to me.'"

"And he was right, Major. Keefe was speaking gospel truth."

"I knew it, dear Miss Durnford, and as I listened to him I pitied the poor fellow from my heart, and I liked him for the manly way in which he spoke."

"'I have not always been straight,' he said to me before we parted for the night. 'I am afraid the recording angel has too many entries against me on the wrong side, but for some years I have been trying to turn over a new leaf.' And then, dear Miss Jem, he spoke of you."

"Of me?" How the sad eyes brightened at this.

"Yes, indeed, and I have not forgotten his words. 'I have no right to marry Miss Durnford, Ford,' that is what he said, 'for she's a good woman, and I am not worthy of her. But if I live I mean to make her happy.'"

"Oh, my darling, to think of that!" and Jem rocked herself and wept.

"'I am so grateful to her for her generous devotion,' he went on, 'that I feel I can never do enough in return. Ford, she saved my boy's life. More than that—when the world was against me and called me an adventurer and a black sheep, Miss Jem refused to believe them. Even when she knew the worst she forgave me and promised to be my wife. God bless and reward her for her goodness!' and then his voice shook and he could say no more; and without another word we went up to our rooms."

CHAPTER XLI

NO CROSS, NO CROWN

Oh, rainy days! Oh, days of sun!
What are ye all when the year is done?
Who shall remember snow or rain?

Oh, years of loss! Oh, joyful years!
What are ye all when Heaven appears?
Who shall look back for joy or pain?

THERE was a brief silence. Jem's head was bowed upon her hands, and she was weeping silently. Major Ford looked inquiringly at Eunice, and she gave him a sign to proceed with his narrative. So he cleared his voice and went on.

"Desmond's room was on the same corridor as mine, but it was at the other end. When he left me at my door he said a kind word or two about my lameness, and seemed quite sorry to see me such a cripple. He had taken his berth in the same steamer, and we arranged to have an early breakfast and then go on board together. Dear Miss Durnford," as he saw her shudder from head to foot, "this is too much for you. Let me tell you the remainder another time."

"No, Major," sobbed Jem. "If I were not such a poor thing I would bear it better. But you must go straight on and not mind me, for I can't help crying a bit now and then; but if it were to kill me, I must know every word." And then again Major Ford went on with his tale.

"It was a long time before I could go to sleep that night. I felt hot and restless, and I could not get Desmond out of my mind. I kept thinking of him and of

poor Jack Hamill in his Indian grave, and how Jack thought of him on his deathbed. But at last my ideas became confused, and I fell into a heavy sleep.

"I was never a light sleeper, and my man often found it difficult to rouse me for early parade, and I woke from a troubled dream to find some one violently shaking me by the shoulder and the room full of smoke.

"'For heaven's sake wake up, Ford!' and it was Keefe Desmond who spoke. 'The hotel is on fire, and there is no time to lose. There is just a chance we can get down by the staircase by my room, but the other end of the corridor is in flames. Get on something and let us go.' I was awake by that time, and was scrambling on a few garments. I was about to take my crutches, but he stopped me. 'There is no time for that, Ford; I must carry you. I am strong and can do it easily,' and I was obliged to submit. As he opened the door the rush of smoke almost suffocated us. The end of the corridor leading to the grand staircase was blazing, and the heat of the flames almost scorched us. Through the awful din and crackling we could hear the screams of women calling for help. It is too horrible to dwell on; but, my dear ladies, do you see, do you grasp the fact, that Keefe Desmond perilled his life to rescue a helpless cripple, who but for him would have been burnt in his bed, when he could easily have saved himself?"

"Oh, my Keefe, my brave Keefe!" moaned Jem.

"How he carried me through that horrible smoke I hardly know, but when we reached the end of the corridor it was too late to try the back staircase, for we could see the passage below was on fire. 'Good God!' I heard him say, 'the whole place is in flames! We must try the window;' and then he carried me into his room, and the next minute we were tying the sheets together. Desmond's room was at the back, and the fire-escapes and engines were at the front of the hotel; and though we shouted for help, no one seemed to hear us. We threw out the mattresses and blankets, and dragged the bedstead

close to the window, and then we prepared to let ourselves down, as we were on the second floor. There seemed a chance of doing it without injury.

"'You go first, Ford,' he said, 'and I'll follow you as fast as I can. Come, come!' impatiently, as I hesitated, 'there is not a moment to be lost, the room will be on fire in another five minutes. What is the use of risking both our lives on such folly?' and then I let him help me up on the window-sill.

"'Go slowly,' he went on, 'the knots are quite firm. Mind you steer clear of that buttress,' a horrid sharp jutting-out corner below us.

"'I'll take care,' was my answer—'God bless you, old fellow!' and before I lowered myself I grasped his hand. I don't think he answered, for he was straining his eyes in the darkness to see where the mattresses were. The next moment there was a flash of a lantern, and some one calling for the fire-escape. Then I came to the end of my tether and let myself go. It was farther than we thought in the darkness, and for a few seconds I was stunned; but I had fallen on the mattress, and there were no bones broken. Some one dragged me away and shouted, a flame shot up suddenly, and I saw Keefe Desmond had clambered up on the sill. He was letting himself down cautiously, when—oh, my God! the horror of it!—one of the sheets gave way. He was hurled to the ground, and his head struck against the stone coping. When they lifted him up he was just breathing, but his eyes were closed, and he never recovered consciousness. Dear friend, you may take to yourself this comfort, that he never suffered; his last breath was drawn before I knew he was dead."

"I can bear no more," whispered Jem, and her face was ghastly. "God bless you, Major! you have been a true friend," and before he could stop her she had taken his hand and kissed it. "It was the last hand my Keefe held, and you were with him when he died."

Jem looked so ill and agitated that Eunice in alarm

begged Major Ford to leave them; then she summoned Susan, and after a little they persuaded Jem to retire to her room.

Later in the evening she grew calmer and more composed, and when Eunice went in to bid her good-night she greeted her with a faint smile. Jem's eyes were swollen with weeping, but there was a strangely peaceful look on her face, and as Eunice sat down beside her she said, "I have been thinking of those words, dear; I cannot get them out of my head, they are so beautiful;" and then she whispered, "'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend.' Eunice, my poor Keefe could have saved himself easily, if he had not gone out of his way to help the Major."

"I know it, dear Miss Jem; Mr. Desmond behaved nobly; it was a fine thing that he did." Then there was a sudden brightness in Jem's eyes.

"Wasn't it grand!" in an awestruck voice; "he knew the Major was crippled and helpless, and he never thought ot himself at all; he carried him through that dreadful smoke and made him go first; and if he had not struck his head he might have been saved too. Oh, my darling, my darling—to think of that!"

From that day Jem grew calmer and more resigned to her trouble; and though she mourned for Keefe for many and many a long day, she struggled bravely with her sorrow.

Keefe, with his weak and erring past, was now a glorified memory, a hero of heroes in Jem's fond eyes. "They never thought it was in him," she would say, "but no one knew how good he was at heart." And on Sunday evenings when she and Billy were alone, she would talk to the boy about his father, what a grand, noble man he was, and how he had lost his own life because he had gone out of his way to help a poor cripple.

Billy was never tired of that story; he would listen to it with rapt attention. "My dad was the bravest man in the world," he would say; "he was as brave as those

three poor men in the burning fiery furnace." And then he would coax Mother Jem to tell him some more, and when Jem's voice grew husky he would climb on her lap and lay his little cheek against hers.

"Don't cry, Mother Jem," he would say; "I shall soon be big, and then I'll take care of you, just as dad meant to do," and then he gave her one of his loving hugs.

As time passed on, all Jem's thoughts and hopes seemed to centre on Keefe's boy, and Billy in his childish way fully returned her affection. Jem was always weary if he were long away from her, and only Billy could bring the smiles to her sad face.

"He is growing like Keefe," she would say sometimes to Eunice or Lilian; and indeed, as Billy grew older, his likeness to his father increased, and it was Jem's delight when she could trace it.

During Major Ford's stay at Shepperton, Jem saw him frequently, and they had many a quiet talk together. She consulted him about the cross that was to be placed over Keefe Desmond's grave, and he gave her both counsel and help. Jem could not make up her mind for a long time what words should be inscribed under the name. She wanted some simple and suitable text, but she rejected all the suggestions offered her. One Sunday evening, when Eunice was reading to her the story of the Prodigal Son, a sudden gleam crossed Jem's face.

"That will do," she said a little breathlessly,—"that will do for Keefe—'I will arise and go to my Father.' I will tell the Major to put that."

And so it was, and the inscription ran as follows—"To the memory of Keefe Russell Desmond, aged thirty, who departed this life, June 1st. 'I will arise and go to my Father.'" And below, "'The greatest of these is charity.'"

"One of these days I will go to New York and see how the cross looks," Jem observed one evening, to Eunice's great surprise; and the following year she carried out her intention.

At the beginning of July, Douglas Hilton and his wife returned home, and a fortnight later the bride was to hold a grand reception. "They want to see all their friends at once, and get rid of all the fuss as quickly as possible," observed Lilian one day when she had bicycled over to the Dene. "It will be very tiring for Araby, but they seem to think it the best plan. I suppose," rather hesitatingly, "that we cannot expect to see Miss Jem."

"Oh, no," returned Eunice; "she means to drive over one evening quietly when she is a little stronger. She wishes me to go, Lilian, and I am to wear my new dress, and drive with Captain and Mrs. Pater." Eunice tried to speak cheerfully, for she wanted Lilian to think that she was pleased with the arrangement, but in her heart she felt it would be rather an ordeal.

Mrs. Pater was generally late, so when they arrived at Monkbarn they found the house and garden already crowded with people.

Araby stood in the centre of the Friars' Hall with her husband beside her, receiving their guests. She greeted Eunice with the utmost warmth. Araby looked almost as lovely as she had on the wedding day: she was dressed simply in soft creamy silk; and with her fair hair, and the delicate flush upon her face, she looked wonderfully pretty and spirituelle.

Her eyes were bright and animated, and every moment she turned to her husband, as though to be sure that he was still near her. Eunice had not seen Douglas Hilton since his marriage. She thought he looked well, though perhaps a trifle grave and impassive. He came to her at once, and talked about Miss Jem for some time.

"Will you tell her that she need not trouble to drive here? Araby and I will ride over one evening." At the sound of her name Araby came up to them and slipped her hand through her husband's arm.

"What mischief are you two plotting, Douglas?"

"No mischief at all," he returned quietly. "I am only telling Miss Cleveland that we will ride over and

see Miss Jem some day. I am sure you would wish to do so, dear."

"Oh yes, we must not forget poor Miss Jem," and Araby sighed as she spoke. "Douglas, the hall is getting so full. Don't you think you and Lilian could induce some of the people to go into the garden?" And at this hint Douglas returned to his duties.

Before Eunice left, Araby sought her out. "I have been too busy to talk to you," she said affectionately. "Did you ever see such a crowd, Eunice?" But Araby's voice was a little exulting. "Let us sit down a moment, for my feet ache with standing. Look how the sun shines on those windows. Monkbarn looks like the Palace Beautiful this evening. Isn't it a lovely home, Eunice?"

"It is indeed," very earnestly. "I hope you and Mr. Hilton will have many happy years in it."

"Years! Oh yes, I hope so." Araby spoke rather hurriedly. "Eunice, dear, I want you to come as often as you did when Lilian was mistress. There is to be no difference, mind. Lilian's friends are mine; besides, I am really fond of you," somewhat smiling as she spoke. "I fancy I like talking to you best. Lilian is a dear, but she is a little too matter-of-fact, and she does not always understand my odd speeches."

"I am not sure that I do either; you say such strange things sometimes, Araby."

"Yes, I know, but I am a married woman now, Eunice, and Douglas says he is going to make me as wise as himself. Oh, there he is," starting up to meet him. "I must not talk to you any more now. I shall ask Miss Jem to let you spend a long day with us. Well, what is it, Douglas?"

"Mrs. Pater is ready to go, and she asked me to find Miss Cleveland;" and then they walked round to the porch, and found Mrs. Pater already in the carriage. Lilian was in the Hill Meadow, so Eunice left a message for her, which Araby promised to deliver.

As they drove through the archway Eunice looked back. Douglas was still standing bareheaded on the gravel path, and Araby was beside him. The sun was shining full on them.

"Do look at the child, Ian; I never saw her look so pretty," Eunice heard Mrs. Pater say,—"with her white dress, and her hair shining like gold in the sunshine, she looks like one of Fra Angelico's angels."

"She looks more like a happy woman," returned her husband quietly. "It is a grand thing that Araby has married a sensible man like Douglas Hilton. It will be the making of her." Captain Pater spoke in a satisfied tone, for he had been well pleased with his sister's choice.

Douglas Hilton kept his word, and a few evenings afterwards he and Araby rode over; but the visit was rather a painful one. Jem received them very kindly, and seemed pleased to see them, and tried bravely to hide her sadness in the presence of the newly married pair; but Douglas was evidently shocked by the altered looks of his old friend, and seemed ill at ease; and Araby, who was always emotional, was so strongly affected by the contrast between her own happiness and Jem's sorrow that she could scarcely keep her tears back; and but for Eunice's tact and persistent cheerfulness the visit would have been a failure.

She decoyed Araby into the garden on the pretext of showing the new rose-walk, and left Douglas and Jem together. And this little ruse answered excellently; for Jem opened her heart to her favourite, and talked to him in her simple way of her trouble, and seemed soothed and comforted by his sympathy. Araby, too, found a vent for her emotion, as she and Eunice paced up and down the rose-walk, by talking alternately of Jem's bereavement and her own perfect happiness.

"I never knew what Douglas was until I married him," she observed, as they returned to the house.

Eunice found herself compelled to go frequently to Monkbarn. Both Araby and Lilian wanted her, and Jem,

with her usual unselfishness, insisted on her accepting the invitations.

Everything seemed working harmoniously. Lilian was still the household brownie, and was as busy and active as ever, and Araby made a graceful chatelaine.

When she was not riding or driving or walking with her husband, she was reading or painting in her pretty room. "Go to Miss Lilian," was her invariable answer when any of the servants came to her for orders, "I know nothing of these matters," and she would go on calmly with her painting or her embroidery.

Eunice very seldom had an opportunity of speaking to Lilian alone. Araby was always with them, and even showed some disposition to monopolise Eunice. But whatever they might be doing, if she heard Douglas's voice or footstep, her face brightened, and she would lay down her work and go to him at once.

"Did you ever see such a devoted wife?" Lilian said one day half jestingly. "I think if Araby had her way she would never let Douglas out of her sight. Ah, there they go," as the two walked slowly towards the fishponds.

Eunice watched them for a moment, and then she said suddenly, "Lilian, do you ever get your brother to yourself now for a nice quiet talk?"

Lilian shook her head, and flushed a little, but she made no other response. Lilian's nature was at once proud and patient; she accepted the inevitable without murmuring.

CHAPTER XLII

THE OLD HOME FACES

All through life there are wayside inns where man may refresh
his soul with love;
Even the lowest may quench his thirst at rivulets fed by springs
above.

—LONGFELLOW.

AT the end of August Jem announced to her young companion that she was going to give her a month's holiday.

"Lilian and me have been talking about it," she continued seriously. "It is near ten months since you saw your own folk, Eunice. It does not seem right to keep you away from them any longer. I have settled everything. Lilian is coming to stay with me and Billy; and she will go home two or three days a week for an hour or so to look after things, so you can be quite comfortable in your mind. You write and tell them you are coming on Tuesday, and Mrs. Compton shall pack a big hamper for you to take to Mrs. Cleveland with my compliments."

This proposition was so sudden that it almost took the girl's breath away. "You are so kind, dear Miss Jem. Are you quite sure you can spare me?" she asked anxiously; but Miss Jem, who was fully determined to carry out her benevolent scheme, soon overcame all scruples.

"Lor', my dear, there is no need to fuss yourself. Lilian wants a change badly, for she has not slept a night out of Monkbarn for over a year, and very likely the change of company will be good for me and Billy. Not that I ever want to part with you, Eunice, for you have been a dear, good girl to me in my trouble." Here a tear dropped on Jem's crape, and she stopped to wipe it

off. "I am going to give you a rise this quarter." And, in spite of Eunice's remonstrances, Jem carried her point, and Eunice found herself promoted to a hundred a year.

"What am I to do?" she exclaimed to Lilian, who had arrived at the Dene the evening before Eunice's departure for London. "I thought eighty pounds far too much for what I did, but I feel as though I should be swindling Miss Jem if I allowed her to pay me a hundred a year. I do nothing to earn my living except play with Billy and take him and the dogs for walks."

Lilian smiled; she quite understood the situation; nevertheless, she advised Eunice to take her salary and be thankful.

"Miss Jem is very obstinate when she makes up her mind," she went on, "and nothing that you can say will move her. After all, you are not robbing her, Eunice. Miss Jem will never marry now, and she is terribly rich. Durnford's Soap sells as well as ever, and there is no one but Billy to share her money.

"You are not only her companion, dear, but you are her friend and younger sister. You have no idea what a comfort you are to her, and how she loves to have you;" and after this Eunice was pacified.

Dr. Cleveland was at the station to meet his sister, and a sudden rush of tenderness came over Eunice when she caught sight of the honest, rugged face. "Oh, Shirley, how good it is to see you again!" she exclaimed as she clasped his arm in the cab; "and you are not a bit changed," gazing at him critically; "only your hair wants cutting."

Dr. Cleveland laughed. "I can't say the same of you, Eunice. Do you know, as you walked up the platform I scarcely recognized you; I could not believe that stylish, well-dressed young lady was my sister."

"Oh, Shirley, how absurd of you! but it is only a bit of blarney."

"On my honour, no; and even now," looking at her keenly, "there is some alteration in you; you are looking

well—exceedingly well—but you are thinner, and a little paler." But to his wife Dr. Cleveland remarked confidentially that he thought Eunice had grown handsomer.

Eunice had plenty of questions to ask during their long drive, but as they drew near home she grew silent.

Had Shepperton and the Dene spoiled her? but certainly Langton Green had never looked so uninteresting. The Green, with its intersecting paths and seats, looked mean and insignificant, and Wentworth Street dull and suburban.

Eunice wondered to see how small the End House looked, and when she remembered the yard and the water-butt she quite shuddered; but as they stopped at the door, and she saw Lucia's sweet face beaming with smiles, Eunice forgot everything, and in a moment they were locked in each other's arms.

Lucia quite cried for joy. "Oh, you dear thing, how I have missed you!" she said in her loving way; "it seems years since you went away! Look, there are the children waiting at the top of the stairs. I told Judy that she and Lot must not come down to the door. Daisy and the boys will not be back from their walk just yet;" and then Eunice ran upstairs to be received with joyful hugs.

Eunice drank her tea, and Judy and Lot waited on her; and then the schoolboys and Daisy rushed in,—Daisy tall and long-legged as ever, but her face already showing traces of her mother's beauty.

It was rather a tumultuous meeting, for Daisy and the boys talked against each other; and their voices were so shrill and loud that Eunice, to quiet them, proposed that Miss Jem's hamper should be unpacked, and this made a diversion, for the boys were so amazed at the array of good things that they were quite speechless. The little larder at the End House was soon full to overflowing.

After this Lucia and Daisy followed Eunice upstairs on the pretext of helping her to unpack, but in reality they were unwilling to have her out of their sight; and though Eunice was tired and longing for solitude, she

submitted to their company cheerfully. How bare and shabby her old room looked after her luxurious chamber at the Dene! The maple wardrobe and washstand were the worse for wear, and the quilt on the little iron bed had been carefully darned; but the next minute she chid herself angrily. Had ten months of luxury so thoroughly demoralised her that her home seemed shabby and unattractive? Eunice cried shame on herself, and then she praised the new pincushion that Daisy had made in her intervals of leisure.

Eunice had left Shepperton so suddenly that she had no time to purchase gifts for her nephews and nieces, but she dropped mysterious hints of the shopping that would take place later.

Lucia seemed rather surprised at the extent of Eunice's wardrobe. "I suppose Miss Durnford expects you to dress well," she observed, as Daisy took out one gown after another; but Eunice soon explained matters. Miss Jem was always giving her things. The tailor-made coat and skirt had been her gift, as well as a pretty spring jacket and hat, and the dainty grey silk with the French embroidery which Lucia considered so lovely had been worn by Miss Jem herself, and been altered to suit her young companion.

And then Eunice narrated how one day Miss Jem had made a review of her wardrobe, and how her room had been strewn with gorgeous raiments of all the colours of the rainbow.

"I doubt I have been too fond of dress," poor Miss Jem had said, rather sadly, "but I never could see a pretty thing in the shop-windows without stopping to buy it. Susan wants me to put all these things back in the wardrobe without looking at them. She won't believe what I tell her, that I shall never dress so smart again. Keefe was of your opinion, Eunice; he hated to see me in bright colours—he said I did not do myself justice. But he loved that sapphire velvet, so I'll never part with it; but you can choose any dresses you think

will suit you, and my dressmaker will soon make them fit you."

Eunice had flatly refused at first; she told Miss Jem quite seriously that the dresses were far too handsome, and it would not be right for her to wear them. "You must remember that I am only your paid companion," went on the girl with proud humility, "though your kindness and generosity often make me forget it;" but Jem had not taken this speech well.

"I don't know what you mean by talking so ridiculously," she returned peevishly—"paid companion indeed! I have always treated you well, Eunice, and if you had been my own sister I could not have done more; and now you won't wear one of my dresses, though they are as good as new, and some of them have cost twenty guineas at least. Perhaps Lilian won't be so proud, as she is not a paid companion."

"Oh, Miss Jem, my dear, dear friend, please do not speak as though I had hurt you;" and Eunice was so shocked at being so misunderstood that she was on the verge of tears. "I should love to wear your dresses. I only thought they were too grand for me;" and this submission soon mollified Jem, and things became smooth again. After this Eunice refused nothing; she would even have taken the eau-de-nil satin if Jem offered it to her. But to her relief it was put back into the wardrobe with the sapphire velvet and the silvery-grey silk dress which, alas, had never been worn.

"Maybe I will wear it at your wedding, Eunice," Jem said with a sigh as she looked at it.

Eunice repeated this little scene to Lucia, and then she told her that her wardrobe in the blue room was full of beautiful dresses that were to be altered for her when she could use them. "Miss Jem declares that she will love to see me in them. She has given Lilian heaps of things, but it makes Susan so cross."

When the first strangeness had worn off, Eunice spent her time very happily. She and Lucia sat working

together and talking of all that had passed during the ten months they had been separated. Eunice's well-filled purse enabled her to plan all kinds of pleasant jaunts and excursions for Daisy and the three elder boys. One day, when Dr. Cleveland had a rare holiday, the whole family down to Lot went by steamer to Hampton Court and Bushey Park, coming home late in the evening. Another day they went to Richmond Park, and had a grand tea at a confectioner's. "We have got a stunning aunt," observed Jock one day; "we have never had so many treats before." And even when they had to go back to school they found all sorts of pleasant surprises on their return.

Eunice used to write long letters to Jem and Lilian, and tell them everything that happened; but it was generally Lilian who wrote in reply. Jem was a bad correspondent, and her letters told Eunice very little. She and Billy were well, and Lilian took good care of them, and she was glad Eunice was enjoying herself, and she was not to hurry back if she wanted another day or two. This was the gist of Jem's letters.

Eunice was never weary of talking to Lucia about her life at the Dene, and her friends at Chez-Nous and Monkbarn. Her descriptions were so graphic that Lucia would say sometimes that both places and people seemed familiar to her; but she loved best to hear of Lilian and her brother. "I like them best of all your friends," she would observe quite seriously, "with the exception of Miss Jem, of course,—I quite doat on Miss Jem."

Eunice spoke quite frankly of Douglas Hilton; nevertheless, Lucia more than once looked up from her work with a swift, keen glance, as though something in the girl's manner struck her.

Lucia had her own thoughts, but she wisely kept them to herself; not even to Shirley did she hint that Eunice was not the same merry, light-hearted creature who had left them ten months ago. In her opinion she was quieter and graver, and at times a little absent.

One evening when Lucia was alone with her husband, Dr. Cleveland began talking about his sister.

"Eunice is very much improved," he observed; "she was always a good little girl, but she has grown older and more womanly; her face has gained in expression, she looked quite pretty last night."

"I always told you that Eunice was good-looking, Shirley, only you never would believe me."

"It was your own fault," returned her husband composedly. "It was rather rough on the girl that she should be thrown into the shade by a handsome sister-in-law."

"Shirley, you ought to be ashamed to talk such nonsense—an old married man with half-a-dozen children." Nevertheless, Lucia blushed very sweetly over the lover-like speech.

"Seriously, Lucia, I am glad we let her go. Eunice had no scope here. She was just a nursery-governess to Judy and Lot, and we could give her no advantages. At Shepperton she sees people and makes friends; she is occupied and happy. Langton Green and the End House would not suit her after the Dene and all its luxuries. She has tasted of the fleshpots of Egypt, and our simple homely life would no longer suffice her." And Lucia reluctantly owned that he was right.

Nevertheless, Eunice was a little sad when the last day of her holiday arrived, and she had driven to the station with Shirley. It was hard to part with Lucia and the children.

"How I do hate saying good-bye!" she said, so vehemently that Dr. Cleveland laughed.

"If you live long enough, my dear child, you will have to say it often enough," he returned kindly; "but there is no use in you and Lucia fretting over a few months' absence. We shall have you next year, Eunice; we must look forward to that." And then Eunice cheered up and began to make plans for her next holiday.

Miss Jem and Billy met her at the Disborough station. Eunice felt quite a thrill of pleasure when she caught

sight of the dumpy little figure in black waving to her as the train stopped. Jem looked almost widow-like in her deep mourning and close little crape bonnet; but somehow it suited her. She had even tried to smooth her rampant fringe. Perhaps this made her look older.

"How nice it is to get you back, Eunice! It seems as though you have been months away," observed Jem affectionately, as the carriage drove off. "Billy has been talking of nothing else since he got up this morning."

"It was so good of you to meet me, Miss Jem," returned Eunice. "I was looking out for Lilian, and then I saw you and Billy."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed, Eunice," observed her friend. "Lilian had to go back to Monkbarn yesterday. Douglas came over to fetch her; Araby is not well; she caught cold one damp day when they were riding."

"Oh dear, I am so sorry! and Lilian had to go?"

"Well, Douglas was in a bit of a fuss, so Lilian said she had better go. She left her love for you, and said she would be sure to come over in a day or two. I told her how you were counting on seeing her, but she said you would understand how it was."

"Oh yes, I quite understand," returned Eunice. But all the same she felt a little damped. She had been so longing to see Lilian, but now Araby would monopolise her; but she tried not to let Miss Jem see how disappointed she was.

Never had Shepperton looked more lovely than it did that evening. The trees were wearing their autumn tints, and the air had the softness that one often feels in October. When Eunice looked round her luxurious room and thought of the bare, ugly chamber at the End House, she felt a little twinge of compunction.

"I am afraid I care for nice things more than I did," she said to herself. "Oh, I hope I am not growing selfish and self-indulgent!" and her letter to Lucia the next day was only all the more tender and affectionate,

as though she feared she had been disloyal to her old home.

Lilian kept her promise. She came over early one morning when Jem was busy in her storeroom, so Eunice had her to herself.

Lilian was as affectionate as ever, but Eunice saw at once that she was not in her usual spirits. She confessed it frankly when Eunice questioned her.

"The fact is, I am very much worried," she said in rather a troubled voice. "Araby is so trying just now. She is really quite ill, but she would not see Dr. Hilliard until yesterday, and then not until Douglas insisted on it. It was so unreasonable, Eunice, for Dr. Hilliard has attended her ever since she was a child."

"I believe Araby has an inveterate dislike to doctors, Lilian."

"So she says. But how is one to do without them? Douglas was quite out of patience with her at last—and then she had to give in."

"And Dr. Hilliard saw her?"

"Yes. And now we are in a fresh difficulty. Dr. Hilliard is not at all satisfied about her. He thinks her extremely delicate, and he is afraid there is evidence of lung mischief. He wants Douglas to take her up to town to see Noel Watson; he is the great authority for that sort of thing."

"Well?" for Lilian paused here.

"Would you believe it, Eunice? Araby absolutely refuses to go, and nothing that Douglas or I can say can change her resolution. Douglas is going to speak to the Paters. He is dreadfully anxious, poor fellow! and no wonder. Araby is working herself up into a fever. She says she has had enough of London doctors, and nothing will induce her to see another. She tells us that Dr. Hilliard can give her any medicine she needs, and she will keep warm and get rid of her cold. She is so perverse and unreasonable that Douglas is at his wits' end. But if Araby does not give way soon there will be friction,

for Douglas is determined to have Noel Watson's opinion." And Lilian sighed heavily as she spoke.

"Do you think Mrs. Pater will do any good?" asked Eunice.

"I do not know; but she will try her best to influence her. She is a kind little soul, Eunice, and she is devoted to Araby. But there, it is no use talking any more about it; we must wait and see how things turn out." And then Lilian resolutly changed the subject.

CHAPTER XLIII

"SHE IS SAD AS DEATH"

"There is not one who really understands,—
Not one to enter into all I feel;"
Such is the cry of each of us in turn.
We wander in a "solitary way,"
No matter what or where our lot may be,
Each heart, mysterious even to itself,
Must live its inner life in solitude.

Two or three days after Lilian's visit Eunice went over to Monkbarn.

Miss Jem, who had taken Araby's perversity much to heart, was extremely anxious to know if Mrs. Pater's persuasions had had any effect. "I don't believe Araby will see you if she is in one of her contrary moods," she observed, as she watched Eunice mount her bicycle, "but you can get a talk with Lilian;" and the girl nodded as she rode down the drive. But when she arrived at Monkbarn she heard, to her regret, that Lilian had gone out with her brother, and that Araby was still upstairs and very unwell.

The maid desired Eunice to wait while she went up to her mistress, and she soon brought back a message that Mrs. Hilton would see her; and in another moment she was ushered into the pretty room that Douglas Hilton had fitted up for his bride.

The window overlooked the fishpond and a long trellis-covered path which in summer was a mass of roses; a corner of the Hill Meadow was also visible.

A clear little fire burned in the grate, and Araby lay on a couch beside it in a white cashmere tea-gown

trimmed with costly lace, and a brilliant Indian-silk quilt over her feet.

She looked flushed and thin, and her eyes had a strained, unnatural expression, and as Eunice took her hand it felt hot and dry.

"I thought you were never coming, Eunice," she said rather reproachfully. "Lilian tells me you have been back for more than a week."

"It was not my fault, dear Araby," returned Eunice gently. "Miss Jem had so many things for me to do, and, after my long holiday, I did not like to leave her. It was her own proposition that I should come to-day."

"You will not see Lilian," replied Araby languidly; "she has gone with Douglas to Manor Hall to inspect an Alderney that is for sale. Does it not sound bucolic, Eunice? 'The milky mother of the herd,' as the poet says. Lilian was quite excited about it. I tell her she is a perfect 'queen of curds and cream.'"

"Lilian is so proud of her dairy," observed Eunice. Araby's tone rather puzzled her; it sounded slightly satirical. "But now tell me about yourself. I fear you have not lost your cold yet."

"It is better—much better; if people only would not make such a fuss about it," and Araby spoke somewhat impatiently. "Tina was over here the day before yesterday, and she was so tiresome and interfering that I nearly quarrelled with her. Eunice, I must talk to you. I have been lying here alone thinking and thinking, until I feel as though I should go crazy." Here a dry, husky cough checked her speech; but after a moment she went on: "They are all against me—Lilian and Ian and Tina—not one of them takes my part, and"—here a look of anguish came into her eyes—"Douglas is angry with me."

"Oh no, dear Araby, impossible!"

"It is true," with forced calmness. "We have been married just four months, and this morning he has left me without a word or kiss—me—his wife, who worships him! Oh, Eunice, was it not cruel?" and here Araby

sobbed, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. For a time her agitation was so excessive that after a soothing word or two Eunice had to wait in grieved silence until she could control herself.

"Dear Araby, you are only exhausting yourself," she said presently.

"No, it has done me good," she returned faintly. "Tears are rather a rare luxury with me, and I needed the relief, Eunice. Believe me, it is better for me to talk, and I know I can trust you. Lilian has told you about Dr. Hilliard's ridiculous proposition?"

"She told us that he wished you to see Noel Watson; but there was nothing unreasonable in that, and it is only natural that Mr. Hilton should want you to have the best advice. Surely you cannot refuse to do what he wishes."

"But I do refuse," returned Araby, and her manner showed strong excitement. "Douglas has no right to be so peremptory and masterful; there are limits even to a wife's obedience."

"I hope you did not tell him that."

"Oh, but I did; and then he was so angry with me. He said I was refusing, just to torment him, and because I loved my own way. When he spoke to me so sternly, I felt as though my heart was turned to stone, and I could not speak. I could not, Eunice. And then he looked at me in a displeased way, and said he would leave me until I was in a better frame of mind, and went out and shut the door."

"Oh, Araby, how you must have hurt him!"

"Oh, I might have known that you would take his part," and there was a gleam in Araby's eyes. "You are all leagued together against me; but I will not give way. Douglas shall not drag me to London against my will. I have seen too many doctors already; besides, Dr. Hilliard understands my constitution. If I am content with him, surely Douglas can be."

"But, Araby, Noel Watson is the great authority for chest complaints, and your own doctor wishes you to see him." Then Araby moved restlessly on her pillow.

"I cannot help that; nothing will induce me to see him. Don't I know what he would say—what they all say?" And here a sudden pallor came over her face. "All the doctors in the world shall not send me away from my home; though Douglas is so hard with me, I cannot leave him—oh, I cannot!" and Araby covered her face with her hands.

"Dear Araby," leaning over her, and stroking her soft hair, "indeed—indeed, you are making a grave mistake; it would be far wiser for you to do as your husband wishes. Why should you fear the consequences of doing your duty? we must do right and leave results, as my dear brother used to say."

"Oh, that is all very well in theory," returned Araby with a sigh, "but you do not know, Eunice—no one knows, not even Douglas—why this is so impossible to me, and why I dare not go to Noel Watson. Oh!" in a voice of despair, "is there never to be any peace for me? four months of perfect, too perfect happiness, and now all this trouble and difficulty."

"Then why not end it, Araby? Tell your husband that you will be guided by him."

"Never!" in a hard, strained voice. "If I am his wife, Douglas has no business to treat me like a child. When I told him that I had my own private reasons why I could not yield to him and Dr. Hilliard in this, he looked as though he did not believe me. 'If you can show me any good reason for this extraordinary behaviour of yours,' he said rather contemptuously, 'I shall be willing to listen to you.' But if I had told him!" and here Araby shuddered.

"Dear, if I could only help you and him too," observed Eunice sorrowfully, as she rose to take leave; for it was evident to her that it was no mere caprice that made Araby so determined not to yield—some secret underlying motive prompted this strange resistance to her husband's wish.

"No one can help me," returned Araby in a tone of

intense pain. "I have done wrong, and I must suffer for it; but there is one thing that I cannot bear, that Douglas should be angry with me! There, do not stay; Miss Jem will want you, and I am too tired to talk more. You have been very kind and patient, and I love you for it; but no one can do me good," and the mournful look that accompanied these words haunted Eunice for the remainder of the day.

Miss Jem was quite distressed when the girl gave her an account of the interview; but it was evident that her strongest sympathy was for Douglas.

"If Araby is so self-willed she is bound to suffer," she observed rather impatiently; "when people are ill they must take their doctor's advice, or it will be the worse for them. Douglas is the most to be pitied, for he has got a sickly wife who gives him a deal of trouble. But there, I never did understand Araby, and I doubt somehow whether she understands herself."

Eunice made herself quite unhappy on Araby's account; and it was an immense relief to her when, two days afterwards, Lilian came over to tell them that Araby had given way, that she and Douglas were going up to town the following morning, and that Mrs. Pater insisted on accompanying them. They would remain a night or two to save Araby fatigue.

Miss Jem had gone out with Billy, so Lilian unburdened her mind very freely to Eunice.

"I daresay you are surprised," she said, "for Araby was so persistent in her refusal. But you little know how great an influence Douglas has over her; and his will is much the stronger. On our return from Manor Hall we heard you had been, and Douglas went up at once to see her, and found her in a terribly exhausted state. I don't know what passed between them, but he looked very worried when he came to luncheon, and afterwards he told me that he was going round to Dr. Hilliard, as he wanted to speak to him about Araby; and then he begged me to stay with her until he returned."

"Oh, I hope I did her no harm!" observed Eunice anxiously. "But Araby was so excited and unlike herself."

"No, I am sure you did not," returned Lilian. "She certainly looked very ill, but she spoke quietly to me, and seemed inclined to rest; and when Dr. Hilliard came he gave her a composing draught, and advised her to go to bed, and Douglas sat with her until she slept. The next day she seemed better, and came early into her sitting-room. I heard Douglas go upstairs when he came in from the farm, but I was busy and took no heed of the time; but presently he came down looking very tired and done up. 'I have had a hard tussle, Lil,' he said, in such a fagged voice. 'But I have conquered her at last; Araby is going up to town with me to-morrow.'"

"Oh, Lilian, how could he have managed it? When I saw her, Araby declared that nothing would induce her to yield."

"I am afraid from Douglas's face that the victory was not an easy one," replied Lilian. "But he told me very little; one thing I know he did say, that if Araby refused to go with him, if she would be so regardless of her own health and his anxiety, he would waste no further words on her, but he would have Noel Watson down to Medfield if it cost him a hundred guineas. 'If you refuse to give me wifely obedience,' he said to her, 'at least I know my duty as a husband, and you shall not play with your health, Araby, as long as I have power to prevent you.'"

"Did she yield when he said that?"

"She was forced to do so—I believe Dr. Hilliard advised him to say that; with all her self-will, Araby is no match for Douglas. She knew he would keep his word, and that Dr. Noel Watson would be brought to Medfield, and so she gave in, but I believe there was a regular scene.

"Poor Mr. Hilton!"

"Oh, you may well say that, Eunice! when I saw my boy's tired face, I found it hard to forgive Araby."

"Did you go up to her, dear?"

"Not then; Douglas said I had better let her rest; but I saw her after luncheon, when Douglas had gone to Chez-Nous, and then she looked so wan and wretched that my heart softened to her. 'Douglas has got his way, Lilian, but he will regret it,' was all she said, and she looked at me so strangely that I felt rather frightened; but after that I could not get her to say another word. Now I must go before Miss Jem comes in," and Lilian rose as she spoke, "for I promised Araby to be back for tea," and then Eunice reluctantly let her go. The next few days passed very slowly; every evening Miss Jem would wonder why they heard nothing from Monkbarn, and Eunice always answered her much in the same words.

"Lilian will not fail us, dear, she will come directly she can. It is just possible that they have stayed longer in London. Very likely Araby needed rest," and this proved to be the case.

But one afternoon, as they were at tea with Billy, in the morning-room, they saw Lilian pass the window, and Jem begged Eunice to take the child upstairs to Susan.

Billy was troublesome, and Eunice found it impossible to leave him at once; but when she hurried downstairs she saw at once Lilian had brought bad news, for Miss Jem was shedding tears, and Lilian looked pale and distressed.

They had had a great shock, she told Eunice, and Douglas had begged her to come over and explain matters.

Dr. Noel Watson's opinion had been very unfavourable; there was serious lung mischief, aggravated by neglect. The extent of the malady was already alarming, and Dr. Hilliard's uneasiness was fully justified. The idea of Araby's wintering in England was simply madness; the only chance for prolonging her life was for her to go to Mentone or San Remo each year from October to April; under no other condition would it be possible for her to live.

"Dr. Noel Watson spoke very plainly to Douglas,"

continued Lilian sadly; "he did not hide from him that Araby was in a very precarious state, and that he feared that it was too late to arrest the threatening symptoms. Oh, Eunice, is it not dreadful!" and Lilian's voice was choked. "Araby is in a decline, and we shall not be able to keep her long with us."

"Poor Douglas, poor dear fellow!" murmured Miss Jem, but Eunice was too shocked to speak.

"She is to go at once," went on Lilian; "there is no time to be lost, and Douglas has telegraphed for rooms; Dr. Noel Watson gave him an address. Do you know, Captain and Mrs. Pater are going with her; that good little creature means to stay with her the whole time. I cannot be spared, Eunice, or I would gladly have gone."

"And your brother?"

"Oh, Douglas will go with her and stay for a week or two, but it is impossible for him to remain. He will go to her from time to time; it is a miserable business. Oh, by the bye, Eunice, Araby wants to see you; she says she would like to bid you and Miss Jem good-bye."

"We will come together, Lilian, but I dare not trust myself long with her," and Jem's eyes filled with tears, "for I am such a poor creature that I am afraid of upsetting myself and her too. How is she, my dear? I fear she will be very down."

"She is sad as death, dear Miss Jem, it breaks one's heart to see her; but she is so patient and gentle. Sometimes she asks me not to be so good to her, because it was all her own fault. 'I knew all the time that it was wrong for me to marry Douglas,' she said to me last night, 'for even before we were engaged I suspected that my lungs were not sound, and I felt sure I should die young like my mother; but oh, Lilian, try to forgive me, for I am sorely punished for my sin.' What could I do but try to comfort her? but oh, my poor boy, he suffers terribly, and he is so young for all this trouble!" and then for a little time Lilian broke down utterly.

CHAPTER XLIV

THROUGH THE SHADOWS

I saw that one who lost her love in pain,
  Who trod on thorns, who drank the loathsome cup,
The lost in night, in day was found again;
  The fallen was lifted up.

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

The unseen is but a veil of luminous ether with saintly faces shining through.

BEFORE Lilian left it was arranged that Miss Jem and Eunice should drive over to Monkbarn the next day.

Jem, whose nerves had been much shaken since her trouble, so dreaded the idea of the interview with Araby that she made Lilian promise to remain in the room with them; so Eunice was left alone in the Friars' Hall, but she was not long kept waiting. Jem soon came down again, looking very much upset. She was so anxious to see Douglas that Lilian sent a farm servant in search of him.

When Eunice saw Araby, she recognised at once that there was a change in her even in these few days. She looked more wasted and very fragile, but her eyes had lost their painful restlessness, and only an unspeakable sadness remained. When she saw Eunice, she held out her arms to her without speaking; that mute embrace, so fond and lingering, spoke volumes.

"Dear Eunice," she said at last—and how weak her voice sounded!—"I could not go away without bidding you good-bye. Douglas was so afraid that I should tire myself with talking, but I told him you always rested me."

"I am glad to know that; oh, Araby, I have been thinking of you so much!"

"And you are sorry for me, I can see it in your face; but I do not deserve all this love and kindness when I have been so wicked. Eunice, if you only knew how good Douglas has been to me! Oh, if I had only taken your advice and told him everything before we went to town, I should have spared him and myself a terrible scene! But when I heard Noel Watson pronounce my death-warrant I nearly fainted, and then for a time I was utterly frantic. I think if Douglas had not helped me I should have gone mad."

"You must not say such things, dearest."

"But if they are true, Eunice! but I will not speak any more of that—it is a dark, dark memory, but my darling has forgiven all. Even when he knew my deceit and how I had kept the truth from him, he did not say a hard word to me; he only told me that I ought to have trusted him, that I need not have feared that he would ever have given me up. 'You ought to have known me better, Arab,' he said, so gently; 'to me an engagement is so sacred and binding that I have always held that only death should break it. If I had known all, I would still have married you, all the more that you needed me so much.' Can you believe in such noble self-sacrifice, Eunice?" and Araby's eyes gleamed with intense feeling. "Douglas, so young and strong and full of life and health, would have married me all the same even if he had known that I was to be an invalid all my life."

"He is a good man, Araby," and Eunice's voice was not quite clear.

"Oh, you would say so if you knew how he talked to me! One day I troubled him dreadfully. I was very unhappy, and the idea of dying young terrified me. I remember I said to him that my love had been so absorbing that it had prevented me from thinking of higher things. He was so shocked when I said that; but he

could not silence me; my pain was so unendurable that I was obliged to give vent to my miserable feelings.

"'God is good, you say, Douglas,' I went on, 'but is it kind or fatherly to tantalise a poor weak girl in this awful way, to separate us when we are so happy?'

"Oh, I was wicked to talk so, and I know I frightened my poor boy. I told him that I could not be happy even in Paradise without him, but he would not let me go on.'

"'Arab, my poor girl,' he said, taking my hands, 'this talk is not worthy of you. This is not love, it is absolute idolatry, and I dare not wonder now at the trouble that has come upon us. God grant that you may still be spared to me! but if the All-merciful should ordain otherwise, and for a time we are parted, when we meet again you will have learnt the lesson that you would not learn here, and you will trust our Father's love.' And somehow as he talked to me the darkness passed, and since then I have felt calmer."

"Thank God for that, dear Araby!"

"Oh, I am trying so hard to be good, for Douglas's sake! He says it makes things so much worse for him to see me so undisciplined and rebellious; that if I would submit more patiently to these months of separation, the time would pass more quickly. Eunice, do you think it is wrong to pray that I may come home once more?"

"Wrong to ask our Father for anything we want, my dear Araby?"

"Oh, that is just what Douglas says! He has such a simple, childlike faith, though he seldom lets me see it. He is very quiet and reticent on such matters; but now and then I get a glimpse into his inner heart. I think few young men care to speak of such things."

"No, indeed!"

"Did they tell you that Ian and Tina will stay with me until April? Ian is so anxious and unhappy about me, and so is Tina. She is a dear little sister to me, and only Ian and I know her worth."

"And Mr. Hilton will be with you?"

"Yes, but not for long. Still, he hopes to come over again in the middle of January. I shall try not to be unreasonable, Eunice. I know quite well that Douglas cannot neglect his duties even for a sick wife; but Lilian is such a splendid manager and knows so much about farming, that he can leave a good deal to her. Oh, there he is," as the door opened and Douglas Hilton's tall figure appeared on the threshold. "He has come to tell us that we have talked long enough." Douglas forced a smile as he shook hands with Eunice. She thought he looked rather thin and careworn.

"No, dear," he said quietly, "only Miss Jem is anxious to go, and Lilian asked me to tell Miss Cleveland that she was ready. I am only sorry to be obliged to interrupt you."

"I am afraid I must go," returned Eunice sorrowfully. Then with his usual tact Douglas walked to the window that he might not interfere with their leave-taking.

"God bless you, Eunice!" whispered Araby as Eunice kissed her. "Pray for me and for him too."

"I will—I will, dearest," but Eunice could say no more. Her tears were falling fast as she left the room, and she was wiping them away when Douglas joined her, but he took no notice, and they walked down the corridor in silence. At the head of the staircase some uncontrollable feeling made her suddenly put out her hand to him.

"Mr. Hilton, you know how grieved I am for you and Araby."

"Yes, I know," very quietly, and for a moment he held the little hand in his strong man's grasp. "God help her and me too!" He said it under his breath, but she heard him, and this was all that passed between them for many a long day.

A few days later Araby left her loved home. Douglas and the Paters were with her. Lilian accompanied them to London and saw them off the next morning. Araby was very calm and gave them no trouble. She charged Lilian with messages to Eunice and Miss Jem.

Lilian looked so sad and out of spirits that Jem proposed that Eunice should go back with her for two or three nights, and this suggestion was received with such manifest pleasure and gratitude that Jem's kind heart was quite touched.

"Don't you leave her until she looks more like herself," she said privately to Eunice. "Lilian has gone through a deal of worry one way or another, and I don't like her being alone just now. I'll drive over in a day or two with Billy and see how you are getting on, and, if I can, take you back with me;" but, as it turned out, Eunice stayed more than a week at Monkbarn, and the visit did both the girls good. Lilian grew more cheerful in her friend's society, and Douglas's first letter was so encouraging that she felt more hopeful.

Douglas was away three weeks, and he brought back a cheery report of the invalid. There was a decided improvement. Araby had revived in the sunshine and soft air, and seemed stronger every day. She had borne the parting bravely, and had sent him away with a smile.

Lilian came over to the Dene the very next day to share the good news with her friends. Douglas was very busy, she said, and though tired from his journey was in tolerable spirits, but she was afraid the house seemed lonely without Araby.

It was evident that Miss Jem expected to see him, for as the days went on she expressed some surprise that he had not found his way to the Dene, but Lilian always made excuses for him.

Just before Christmas he called one morning when Eunice had gone to Shelgate on a shopping expedition, but he had not stayed long.

Miss Jem told her that he had seemed rather worried. The last account from Mentone had not been so satisfactory. Araby had taken cold again, and her cough was very troublesome. He talked of going to her as soon as the Christmas business was over, and remaining for some weeks; and he begged Miss Jem to spare Miss Cleve-

land as much as possible, as Lilian would be so lonely. No one ever asked a favour of Miss Jem in vain, and so it became a rule that Eunice should spend a night or two every week at Monkbarn. Eunice was always too pleased to go. Time only deepened her affection and friendship. Each day she realised more strongly the beauty of Lilian's character, her crystalline purity of motive, the sweetness of her nature, and her utter selflessness. In many ways she and Douglas strongly resembled each other. They both had the same love of truth and horror of deception and humbug, the same high standard of honour, the same straightforward simplicity. To the outward world Lilian Hilton was only a managing, good-tempered girl, who was ready to do anything to serve her friends and who never spoke ill of any one; and then some well-wisher would say that it was a pity that Lilian, with all her pleasant ways, should be so plain.

Lilian warmly responded to Eunice's friendship. She once told her that it added to the enjoyment of her life; that she had never before known the pleasure of congenial and sympathetic fellowship; but she never said more than this. Lilian did not eulogise her friends, and was rarely demonstrative, but she lived for them.

And so it was that Eunice was at Monkbarn that February day when a telegram from Douglas reached Lilian.

It brought sad news. Araby was very ill, hæmorrhage had come on. There was great cause for alarm.

Lilian did not lose her presence of mind, and though she was very pale she was quite collected. All along she knew that this was what the doctors had feared.

"You must help me to get ready, Eunice," she said quietly. "Of course I must go at once. God grant I may be in time!" and then without wasting another moment Lilian put her house in order, interviewing her bailiff and dairywomen. Then, with Eunice's help, she packed a small travelling-box and set off to London by a late afternoon train.

Eunice marvelled greatly at Lilian's fearlessness and

independence. Her solitary journey did not trouble her in the least. She knew all about the route, and could quite well manage for herself. Her only anxiety seemed to be that she might not arrive too late. "Douglas knows that I shall come to him," she said to Eunice, "though he said nothing in his telegram. I must be with him in his trouble"—these were her parting words to Eunice just before the train left the platform. "You will pray for us, dear, for there are sad days in store for us."

Jem was very much startled when Eunice walked in at tea-time, for she had not expected her until the next day. She listened with a scared face while Eunice told her the bad news.

"Life isn't much worth living, Eunice," she said in a troubled tone. "Here I am, a widow in everything but the name; and there's Douglas will be a widower, and he not eight-and-twenty yet. Oh, it is a weary world, a watery Sabbath, as old Jean used to say," and Jem was very cast down all the evening.

Lilian telegraphed her arrival to Eunice. Araby was still alive, but there was no hope. Twenty-four hours later there was another from Captain Pater. Araby had passed away in the early morning, and the end had been very sudden. Lilian's letter when it arrived gave them fuller particulars. Araby had revived a little, and Lilian had been allowed to see her. She had only been able to say a few words, but such a lovely smile had crossed her face as Lilian kissed her.

"It is so good of you to come, darling," she whispered. "You will take care of Douglas. Don't let him miss me too much." And then the nurse had made a sign to Lilian to withdraw; but she had seen her again the next morning, and a few more words had passed between them.

"I am dying, Lilian!" Araby had said faintly; "but it is God's will, and He knows best." And after an interval of exhausted sleep, "If I lived it would only mean suffering to us both. It is better as it is, far better."

And once again, "My love was sinful, I see it now; but I think God has forgiven me, or I should not feel so peaceful. What does it matter, a few years' parting, when we have eternity to spend together?"

"Those were her last words, Eunice. Could anything be more comforting? Douglas was so touched when I repeated them to him. After this dear Araby was too feeble to speak, but she seemed to like us being in the room, and more than once I saw her look at Douglas so lovingly; but she said no word. We were with her when the end came. It was quite unexpected. Nurse had just left the room, when there was a sudden return of the hæmorrhage. I had only time to ring the bell, when her eyes closed, and the next moment all was over. Douglas would not believe it at first; he was sponging the blood from her lips, when Captain Pater took his arm and begged him to come away. It was so sudden, such a terrible shock, no wonder he could not realise it. But he is calmer now. And we have just been together to choose her grave."

The next letter was a brief one, and only told them that they were returning home the day after the funeral. The Paters were remaining a few days longer to settle matters.

Lilian soon found her way to the Dene. She brought Eunice a beautiful bracelet that Araby had left to her as a parting gift.

Araby had made out a list of remembrances for all her friends; but her most valuable jewellery was left to her husband. "Douglas will be a rich man, Eunice," observed Lilian sadly. "But he cares nothing about it."

"Perhaps he will, some day," returned Eunice, rather absently. She was looking at the diamond-studded bracelet. It was Araby's favourite ornament, and was a gift from her brother, and she so often wore it. Eunice had once admired it. How little she thought then that Araby would remember her words! Her lips quivered as she closed the case.

"And your brother, Lilian?"

"He is very sad; but he will not spare himself, and I think he is right. He says it is better to work than to brood, but of course he takes no pleasure in anything. In the evening we talk about Araby; he likes me to tell him little things about her. But very often he cannot bear it, and then we sit in silence. It seems to hurt him so to remember how she suffered, and that he could not always be with her. 'No one will ever love me as my Arab did,' he said once. And, Eunice, I feel he is right."

Eunice thought sadly over these words when Lilian had left her. Doubtless they were true; and yet if Araby had lived, that passionate, monopolising love of hers must surely have wearied him by its very intensity.

Douglas Hilton's nature was deep, but it was also calm and undemonstrative. His equable temperament knew no hot or cold fits; it was even and unchanging. When he loved, he was faithful; but he had no ready vocabulary of love's language always on hand. Araby's vehement need of expression, her anguish of jealousy, her tormenting scruples and unrest, would certainly have injured his happiness and robbed him of peace. For all his efforts and self-suppression, he would never have satisfied her.

And so perhaps it was well that Araby should die in the first bloom of wedded bliss, and be cherished and idealised in her husband's memory.

For the dead are blameless in our eyes, and through the filmy veil of distance that lies between us and those whom we have lost, each fault and human infirmity that tried us here seems merged into indistinctness. Here we were hard to them, we judged their failings with little charity, we were not always careful to keep from them that they often wearied us. But they are gone, and the weak, kindly hand is no longer held out to us. Our loved one has departed to another life, and our eyes are purged from their grossness and we no longer judge them censoriously. Now their blemishes have become

beauties, their little failings are dear to us because they were part of those we loved. "Would we had been kinder," we say, "more forbearing and patient!" And so by the tomb of some dear departed friend we strew our bitter herbs of repentance, and wear our "rue with a difference."

CHAPTER XLV

SUMMER DAYS AT THE DENE

They never quite leave us, our friends who have passed
Through the shadows of death to the sunlight above;
A thousand sweet memories are holding them fast
To the places they blessed with their presence and love.

JEM drove over to Monkbarn two or three times, but Eunice did not accompany her. "It will be better for you to go alone," she had said. And Jem had agreed with her; but she always returned in low spirits.

Douglas had seemed touched by his old friend's sympathy, but he had said little to her, and his grave composure had given her no opening for any confidential talk.

"He just shuts himself up, does Douglas," observed Jem dolefully, "and no one can get close to him or say a word. It made me feel quite bad to see him and to know what he has been through, poor fellow. But there, we have all got to bear our troubles," and Jem's blue eyes were very misty.

Lilian endorsed this when she came over to the Dene. She told Eunice that Douglas shrank from seeing people. He would go nowhere but to Chez-Nous.

"He is far better when he is alone with me," she went on, "for then he need not pretend to be cheerful. I am afraid, Eunice dear, that we shall see very little of each other this summer, for I do not like to absent myself for more than an hour or two. It would never do for him to sit down to a solitary meal. And now Miss Jem tells me that she really intends to go to New York, and that she means to take you with her."

Jem had been making her plans, and it was now quite

settled that they were to start early in May, and would probably not return until the beginning of July. Major Ford was at Chez-Nous, and had given Jem a good deal of assistance, and had offered to take their berths on his return to London.

Billy had been the chief difficulty. Lilian was so fully engrossed with her brother that she could not undertake to look after him, and Jem was almost at her wits' end. It was then that Eunice made a brilliant suggestion. Why not leave him at the End House under Lucia's care? He would have Judy and Lot for playfellows. She was sure they would make him happy. And then Shirley was at hand if Billy should have any childish ailments.

Jem was delighted with this proposition; but she insisted that they must go up to London to make the necessary arrangements. And Jem being a woman of action, they started for town the very next day. And the family at the End House were electrified one morning by receiving a note from Eunice, with a London postmark, stating that she and Miss Jem intended to call that afternoon.

The interview was highly successful. Jem was charmed with Lucia's gentleness and good looks. "A pretty, ladylike creature, but none too strong," as she observed afterwards to Eunice. Jem was also strongly impressed with Dr. Cleveland's good sense, and she was charmed with the children. Lot especially took her fancy. And the arrangements were soon made to the satisfaction of every one, including Billy.

Jem was able to start on her pilgrimage without any undue anxiety for the child of her adoption; but indeed physical discomforts soon banished every thought except her own misery. Jem proved a wretched sailor, and the voyage was half over before she could quit her berth and go on deck.

"Do you suppose, Sigbert, that that little yellow-faced woman in black is any relation of that fine girl, Miss

Cleveland?" asked an American lady somewhat inquisitively; "do tell, for she is as attentive to her as possible."

"No relation at all," returned Sigbert, lighting his cigarette. "That queer little lady is Miss Durnford—Durnford's Soap, ma'am—guess she has made her little pile, and is going to have her fling. Miss Cleveland is her companion." And after this Mrs. Lauderdale ceased her kindly overtures to the girl.

To Eunice everything was new and delightful, and she wrote rapturous descriptions of New York to Lucia and Lilian. Major Ford's friends had called on them. The Lakes were pleasant people and thoroughly hospitable, and they carried off Eunice to show her everything of interest. Jem was quite willing for her to go. When the Lakes' smart carriage had driven off, Jem would go and sit quietly in a shady corner of the cemetery among the birds and flowers, and think peacefully and happily of Keefe. "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me," she would say as she wiped away a quiet tear or two. "Maybe, when Billy is a grown man, and does not need me any more, I shall be allowed to be with my Keefe again, and I must be patient until then." And Jem would smooth the soft turf at the foot of the marble cross with loving fingers before she turned away,—a dumpy little figure in widow-like black, but with such a brave, tender, loving heart!

Jem was all the happier when her pious pilgrimage had been accomplished and she turned her face homeward again.

They stayed for a few days in town to fetch Billy, and also for the purpose of shopping, for Jem wished to lighten her mourning. They called more than once at the End House. Billy was looking the picture of health. He seemed so disconsolate at the idea of leaving his playmates, that a delightful plan came into Jem's head. Lucia looked worn and delicate, the hot weather tried her, so Jem proposed that she should bring Judy and Lot and spend August at the Dene. When Lucia flushed and

hesitated, and yet was sorely tempted, Jem boldly enlisted Dr. Cleveland on her side. Daisy was quite a big girl now, she remarked, and could be trusted to keep her brothers in order. Dr. Cleveland must come down early in September and spend a few days. Jem was quite urgent for her benevolent scheme to be carried out, and Eunice used every possible argument. Lucia declared she could not leave her husband and children; but Shirley soon undeceived her. She had had no change for years, the country air would do her more good than anything, and the benefit to the children was incalculable. He would be glad of a week's holiday himself. And then to every one's relief it was finally settled.

Before they left, Eunice put a little packet of money in Lucia's hands. "You must get a new dress or two for the Dene," she said seriously. "I shall be disappointed if you do not make yourself as nice as possible;" and Lucia accepted the gift with tearful gratitude. "I could not have asked Shirley for the money, after his having bought the new drawing-room carpet and cretonne," she returned, "and I know I am rather shabby," and with a light heart Lucia set about her purchases.

Eunice wondered when she would see Douglas Hilton again. A day or two after their return to the Dene, Jem proposed they should drive over to Medfield, but they found Lilian alone. Douglas was yachting with the Paters, and would not be back until the middle of August at the earliest. "He is so fond of the sea, and nothing will do him so much good," Lilian told them. "Already I can see from his letters that he is more like himself."

Lilian had too much business on her hands during her brother's absence to come over to the Dene; but Eunice spent two or three days with her, and this renewal of the old intercourse was a great pleasure to them both. In due time Lucia and the children arrived, and Jem bustled about in her old way, and made much of the visitors. To Lucia the Dene was a veritable paradise of comfort; the luxurious meals, the well-trained servants, the quiet

leisure of her holiday life, seemed wonderful to her. For five weeks the mending-basket was banished from memory, and no noisy schoolboys rushed in at all hours to ask mother for some coveted article in the shape of paper and string. Lucia lay in her comfortable hammock in the Wilderness, with some book or fancy-work in her lap, while Jem in her lounge-chair kept watch over the children, who were playing at being gipsies among the firs.

Jem would spend hours watching them building their fir-cone castles, or rolling over each other down the grassy banks of the tennis-lawn. Judy, who was a regular tomboy, was always a leader in their games. Sometimes Susan and one of the maids would take them into the woods to gather flowers, and on these occasions the three ladies would take long country drives.

One afternoon they drove over to Monkbarn, and Lucia was charmed with the place. "You have not said a word too much about it, Eunice," she observed, as they drove away. "It is a lovely old house, and I never saw anything like the Friars' Hall in my life."

"And you like Lilian?"

"Indeed I do. She is a thoroughly nice girl; and I was perfectly amazed at her cleverness and management. I wish I could have seen Mr. Hilton; and he is to return to-morrow too, so we have only just missed him."

"Oh, we will go over again when Dr. Cleveland comes," returned Miss Jem. "I am so glad you are pleased with Lilian, for Eunice and me think a deal of her. She means to fix a day when Douglas gets back. She thinks he will be more ready to see his friends by that time. She wants us to come over to luncheon, and then Douglas can show the doctor over the farm."

A fortnight later, when Dr. Cleveland arrived, a note from Lilian made its appearance one morning. Her brother would be very pleased, she wrote, to make Dr. and Mrs. Cleveland's acquaintance; he had intended to have called on them, but business had detained him. He

hoped they would waive all ceremony, and that they would have luncheon at Monkbarn the following day. Of course Miss Jem and Miss Cleveland would accompany them. "Do come, I am sure Douglas really wishes it;" was added in the postscript; for the note, which was slightly stiff, had evidently been written under supervision.

"I suppose we must go," observed Miss Jem, and as no one negatived this, and Dr. Cleveland and his wife seemed pleased by the invitation, a few lines of acceptance were sent by bearer. Eunice would gladly have remained behind, but she did not dare to hint at this. She had not seen Douglas Hilton since his trouble, and she felt that she would rather have met him under other circumstances. She could not divest herself of the idea that the society of strangers would be irksome to him. She was rather silent during their drive, but Lucia was unusually talkative; and more than once Jem smiled quite cheerfully, as though she were amused. She and Lucia had taken to each other; "That dear little woman," Lucia would say when she spoke of Jem.

When Lilian came into the porch to greet them her brother was behind her. Eunice, who was the last to get out of the carriage, found Douglas's hand held out to assist her; but he did not speak, neither did she, and a moment afterwards he was talking to Dr. Cleveland.

For a few minutes Eunice felt uneasy; that silent grasp of her hand seemed to her so strange. It was more than ten months since they had met, and so much had happened since then, and yet he had not said a single word to her. Perhaps it was she who ought to have spoken; probably he was thinking her cold and remiss. As this uncomfortable thought passed through her mind, she glanced at him.

They were all standing in the Friars' Hall, and Shirley was admiring the vaulted roof with its oaken beams. Douglas was listening to him quietly, but there was no smile on his lips. His face was grave and impassive,

and Eunice saw that he looked older and much thinner, though the sea air had bronzed him. Suddenly he raised his eyes as though aware of her scrutiny; for a second there was a recognising flash in them, the next moment he paled a little under his tan; but Eunice had turned away under the pretext of speaking to Lucia.

Eunice could not enjoy her luncheon. She felt embarrassed and tongue-tied. Douglas Hilton was treating her strangely; he hardly seemed to notice her. All through the meal he talked principally to Dr. Cleveland, and gave him an account of their yachting cruise. Sometimes he addressed Lucia rather formally as she sat beside him. Eunice talked in an undertone to Lilian most of the time.

When the meal was over and coffee had been served, the two gentlemen went out to make a thorough inspection of the Farm; while the ladies adjourned to the garden. Lilian had some business to transact at one of the cottages, and asked Eunice to accompany her. "We shall be back in twenty minutes—if you will entertain Mrs. Cleveland, Miss Jem," she remarked lightly; and then they walked quickly to the village. Lilian had noticed a pained look on her friend's face, and she wanted to say a word to her.

"Eunice, dear," she began at once, "I am afraid you are just a little bit hurt with Douglas. It must have seemed to you as though you were neglected, and that he talked to no one but your brother; but please do not be hard on him."

"I hard! What can you mean, Lilian?" and Eunice coloured resentfully.

"I just mean what I say, dear," with a smile; "that you must be kind to my poor boy, and forgive his want of manners. Eunice, I know Douglas so well. He made up his mind to the luncheon-party because he thought it right; but he is not a bit himself. I think, I am almost sure, that he finds it difficult to talk to you. You have not been here since dear Araby was ill in October, and

I suspect that Douglas remembers that. Don't you recollect, Eunice, that he went upstairs to fetch you, and that you came down together? That is nearly a year ago!"

"Yes, I remember, and I had not seen him until to-day." Eunice spoke hurriedly. "Lilian, do you think I ought to have said something to him? I was so nervous, and I let the opportunity slip."

"Never mind," returned Lilian cheerfully; "you will have plenty of opportunities yet. Douglas has made a beginning, and I am not going to let him neglect his friends any longer. We shall be bicycling over to the Dene before long, and you and Douglas will be on the same old friendly terms."

"And he does not think me unkind?"

"You silly child, of course not. You may depend on it that Douglas does not misunderstand you in the least." Then was Eunice comforted, for she knew that Lilian never deceived her.

Later in the afternoon, when tea was served in the Friars' Hall, Douglas took his cup to the oak bench where Eunice had seated herself, and stood beside her for a few minutes.

"Why have you hidden yourself in this corner, Miss Cleveland? I did not see you at first. I wanted to tell you how glad I am to make your brother's acquaintance." It was the old pleasant voice, though it had a deprecatory note in it—the old friendly manner.

"Dr. Cleveland is a man after my own heart," he went on. "He told me that if he had not been a medical man he would have liked to have been a farmer."

"Shirley is so fond of the country, and so is Lucia."

"And yet they have to live among suburban slums. I know Langton Green well, and I have an idea that I have passed the End House. It is not exactly an attractive neighbourhood."

"No, I daresay not," returned Eunice quietly. "But Shirley is too busy to quarrel with his environment; and, though Langton Green is not specially nice, his work and

his home are there. You have no idea how the poor people love him."

"I can well believe it, Miss Cleveland. He has what the children call a trustable face, and a kind manner; but I wish he could have a better scope for his talents. He was telling me just now that he has four boys to educate."

Eunice sighed. Her brother's anxieties and burdens had always lain very heavily on her shoulders; but as long as Dr. Sandford lived she knew he would be a poor man.

At this moment Shirley joined them, and Douglas engaged him in conversation. Eunice listened to them quietly. She was happier and more content. The ice was broken between her and Douglas Hilton. He had sought her out of his own accord, and talked to her with his old friendliness, and she no longer felt left out in the corner.

When she went upstairs to put on her hat, Lilian followed her.

"So Douglas has made amends, Eunice?" she said smiling. "I saw him talking to you just now."

"Yes, he was telling me how well he and Shirley had got on. I think they have rather taken to each other. I always know by Shirley's manner when he likes a person."

"There is not a doubt of it. Do you know, Douglas has promised to have luncheon at the Dene on Thursday. He is to drive your brother over to Hocksley in his dog-cart. I think I shall invite myself for the afternoon. I want to see more of your Lucia. She is a sweet woman, Eunice, and I have lost my heart to her. Now we must go, for I hear the carriage-wheels."

"Capital fellow, Hilton," observed Dr. Cleveland as they drove back. "I should like to know more of him. It is no wonder that he is proud of such a grand old place."

"He looks very much out of spirits, Shirley," remarked

Lucia. "I felt so sorry for him; his wife has only been dead six months."

"He ought never to have married her," returned Dr. Cleveland, in his decided way. "By all accounts she had lung disease when they were engaged."

"Did he speak of her to you, dear?"

"Yes, just a word or two. He seems to feel her loss very deeply; but he has a reserved nature, and one could not expect him to confide in a complete stranger." And then Shirley changed the subject by asking Miss Jem if she had seen the remains of the Roman road at Hocksley.

CHAPTER XLVI

ROSES IN THE WILDERNESS

Mine! O heart, dost thou know it? dost thou grasp the gift that I gain?
Strength for my weakness, calm for my turmoil, solace in pain,
Love for my love,—the broadening life whereto twin souls attain:
My Beloved is mine, and I am his!

—E. M. L. G.

ONE lovely September afternoon Eunice sat in the Wilderness, but her book lay closed in her lap, and her eyes were absently following the fluttering movements of a white butterfly that was struggling to find its way out of the little wood into the hot sunshine beyond. Two years had passed since that day when Douglas Hilton had talked to her in the Friars' Hall—two peaceful, uneventful years. Happy is the life which, like the nation, has no history; no sad records of lost battles and weary warfare; no shocks and cataclysm of Fate; no arid deserts to traverse before the restful oasis is reached; no stress and storm of untoward and unkindly circumstance. As Eunice looked back over those years it seemed to her as though her life had resembled some quiet backwater wherein she had drifted peacefully from day to day past green banks and tiny islets, where bulrushes and sedgy weeds impeded the stroke of the oar, where great white water-lilies floated on the margin of the stream, and tiny forget-me-nots looked like a blue mist in the distance; here the force of life's current had abated, the winds were hushed, and a pleasant calm seemed to brood over everything. So little had happened in those years; and yet to Eunice they had been years of quiet growth and enjoyment. Her life at the Dene had become more settled and

home-like; her love for Miss Jem warmer and tenderer; her friendship for Lilian stronger and more satisfying. To Miss Jem, Eunice was a necessary part of her daily life—she could do nothing without her.

"Whatever could I have done without you, Eunice?" she would say sometimes; "for you have been the greatest comfort of my life." And Jem fully meant what she said.

Eunice could almost have counted up the events of those years on her fingers. There were the spring visits to town, when Billy was left at the End House while she and Miss Jem set out for their day's shopping. Then Daisy had outgrown her strength, and become thin and weedy; and Jem had sent for her, and kept her for nearly three months till she had grown quite strong and fat with the help of country air and sweet new milk. What happy months those had been to Daisy! Each year Lucia had come to them with Lot and Judy. Jem was never so content as when she had children round her. Jem told Eunice that she had serious thoughts of adopting Lot, if only his parents could be persuaded to let him go; but, though Dr. Cleveland saw the force of her argument, he told her frankly that nothing would induce him to part with one of his children. They came to a compromise at last. Lot was to spend each summer at the Dene, and when Billy went to school Lot was to accompany him, only spending his holidays at home. Jem would educate him and give him the same advantages that Billy would have, and for the boy's sake Dr. Cleveland could not refuse Jem's generous offer. But Judy lamented loudly the loss of her playfellow.

Dr. Cleveland always came down for a week or ten days in September. He declared that he looked forward to his holiday all the year, but he spent the greater part of his time at Monkbarn. He and Douglas Hilton were congenial spirits, and on the days he failed to turn up at Medfield Douglas generally made some excuse for going over to the Dene.

During the last few months he had been a frequent

visitor, and he and Eunice were on their old terms of friendly intimacy. During the last spring Lilian, who was rarely ill, had had a severe attack of influenza, and Eunice had gone to her at once, and had nursed her day and night, remaining with her until she was able to leave her room.

Douglas had been away the first few days. The Paters had taken a house for a few months at Torquay, and he had been staying with them. Lilian begged that her illness might be kept from him, as she knew he would hurry back, but Dr. Hilliard declined the responsibility. When Douglas returned home he found Eunice installed in the sick-room, and the invalid a shade better, but the attack had been unusually severe, and Lilian's weakness was great.

Douglas's relief and gratitude found no vent in words, but Eunice did not misunderstand him. She saw little of him. A few words exchanged morning and evening in the sick-room or in the passage outside were all that passed between them. Eunice had all her meals upstairs. Araby's pretty sitting-room was placed at her disposal. The master of the house never saw her, except when he paid his brief daily visits to his sister. When Lilian was well enough to be on the couch in the boudoir, and Douglas's visits became longer each day, Eunice took her leave and went back to the Dene, only driving over with Miss Jem once or twice a week. One day they brought Lilian back with them to stay at the Dene. That was Jem's idea. To their surprise, Douglas rode over almost daily.

"You won't get rid of me as long as Lilian is here," he would say to Miss Jem.

It was since Lilian's illness that Eunice had noticed a difference in him. The heavy, careworn look had left his face. He looked more like the old Douglas. Each day that he came he seemed kinder and more gentle, and something in his manner told her that he valued her friendship, and took pleasure in her society. Eunice was

far too humble, in her own opinion of herself, to indulge in any more vague hopes that might doom her to disappointments. She was content to drift along in that quiet backwater of hers. Life was good and sweet, she could say that now. Her dear Miss Jem was happier, and fretted less as time went on; and her friendship with Lilian and her brother was steady and undeviating. "Oh, how happy I ought to be," she murmured half-aloud, but the next moment a sudden thrill of surprise and pleasure crossed her. Surely she knew that footstep! An instant later a hand parted the branches, and Douglas Hilton stood before her.

"I saw the gleam of a white dress as I was standing in the porch," he said as he shook hands with her, "and so I thought I should find you all here. What has become of everybody?"

"Miss Jem and Lucia have taken the children to the Manor Wood," returned Eunice hurriedly. Douglas was so tall he seemed to tower over her. She wished he would sit down. "It is Lot's birthday, you know, and we are expecting Shirley; and as we are not quite sure of his train I offered to remain at home."

"And you would rather have gone with the others?"

"Oh yes, of course; building fires and boiling kettles are so delightful; but it would never do for Shirley to come by an earlier train and find no one to receive him."

"And that might have been my fate," looking at her rather intently.

"Oh, but I am here, you see. Now, will you spare me for a moment, Mr. Hilton? I want to tell Rachel that we will have tea out here," and she would have passed him, but he put a detaining hand on her arm.

"No, please stay a moment. There is no hurry for tea, and I never see you alone, and there is so much I want to say to you. I am glad your brother is coming," and there was some strange meaning in Douglas Hilton's voice; "there is something that I have to ask him. Can you guess what it is, Eunice?"

Could she guess? Eunice gave him a shy, startled look, and then her head drooped. How could she fail to know the truth when she had seen the love-light in his eyes—when she felt the tightening grasp of his hand on hers? The next moment his arm was round her, and he was drawing her gently towards him. "Eunice, why are you so pale? Have I been too sudden, darling? But you must have known all this time that I loved you, though I tried so hard to hide it." And there was a passionate ring in Douglas's voice that Araby had never heard.

Had she known it? As he spoke a sudden blinding flash seemed to reveal the truth to her. It was she whom he had loved and not Araby. And yet Araby had been his wife. But he had been faithful to her memory, and had waited patiently; and now it had come to this. Oh, well might Eunice tremble at the thought of her own exceeding happiness.

"Dearest, I have had no answer! I must hear from your lips that my love is returned, and that you are willing to be my wife."

Eunice never knew what she said, but it was evident that her answer fully satisfied Douglas; for, as he held her closely to him, he murmured a few words of deep tenderness as though his inmost heart were stirred.

Presently he placed her in her old seat, and sat down beside her. Eunice was a little shy with him at first. She was in a trance of happiness, but it was all so strange and dreamlike. Her changing colour and broken sentences showed her agitation. How sweet she looked in her lover's eyes! But he restrained his passionate devotion for fear of startling her, and he had his reward. Eunice soon became more at her ease with him, and they talked as lovers have talked since the days of Eden and our fair mother Eve.

But an interruption came soon in the shape of Rachel, and Eunice started and blushed as Douglas hastily released her hand.

"Dr. Cleveland has arrived, ma'am," Rachel announced, "and I have put tea in the drawing-room;" but there was a furtive smile on Rachel's lips as she returned to the house. "I always knew Mr. Hilton was sweet on our Miss Cleveland," she said to herself.

"We had better go in and get it over before the others come in," observed Douglas as Eunice hesitated. "I don't think your brother will be formidable," and then they walked slowly after Rachel.

Dr. Cleveland was not a demonstrative man, but when he saw his young sister's face as she came into the room, closely followed by Douglas, a sudden mist came to his honest eyes, and for the moment words failed him, but Douglas was quite equal to the occasion. He took the girl's hand, and said quietly, "Dr. Cleveland, Eunice has promised to marry me. I hope I shall be an acceptable brother-in-law;" and then the two men grasped hands.

"I could not have one more to my liking, my dear fellow," returned the doctor; and then he turned to his sister. Never in her life had Eunice had such a kiss from Shirley. "God bless you, child," he whispered; but his voice was not quite clear, and Eunice crept away shyly to her tea-table, and busied herself with the cups and saucers.

Lucia's joy when she heard the news baffled description. Shirley told her of the engagement as soon as she came into the house. "Eunice is a lucky girl," he went on, "but she deserves her happiness. Douglas Hilton is the best fellow in the world. I have the highest respect for him. Just think of our little girl being mistress of a place like Monkbarn!"

Lucia had to postpone her congratulations for a little while, for she knew that Eunice and Douglas were in the morning-room with Miss Jem.

Poor Jem's feelings were a little mixed. "You musn't think I ain't glad, Douglas," she said tearfully, "for you will get a good wife in Eunice; and, though I say it before her face, she is worth her weight in gold. But

what am I to do without her? That's what I want to know."

"But I am not going to leave you yet, dear," observed Eunice soothingly.

But Douglas laughingly interrupted her. "Don't you believe her, Miss Jem; you and I know better than that. But I cannot have you talk in this doleful fashion. Medfield and Shepperton are not far apart, and we shall be close neighbours. You need not think that Eunice and I will ever neglect our old friend. No, no, Miss Jem. We owe you too much for that."

"Dearest," pleaded Eunice, "if you are unhappy about it, it will spoil things for both of us."

"Lor', my dears, don't talk so," and Jem dried her eyes hastily. "I deserve to be whipped for my selfishness. I am downright happy about it, that I am; you have been a dear good girl to me, and I am right glad that Douglas has found out your worth, for there is no one who will make you a better husband; so I won't have you keep him waiting, Eunice, and I will spare you willingly whenever he says the word." And then Jem kissed them both, and went off with red eyes to tell Susan the grand news, and then Lucia had her innings.

Later on in the evening Eunice and Douglas stole out into the garden to enjoy the moonlight, and sat down on the bench near the rose-walk.

It was then that Douglas spoke to his young betrothed of his wife.

"It is right that you should know everything," he said in a moved voice. "You are so truthful and sincere yourself, Eunice, that it would be wrong for me to hide anything from you; there must be no secrets between us, my darling. We must be absolutely true to each other."

"I hope so indeed, Douglas."

"Then what will you say, love," and here Douglas took the little hand in his, "when I confess to you that I loved you from the first? One cannot explain these things, they are mysteries; but when I saw your face, Eunice, my

heart told me that you were the woman I ought to make my wife?"

"Oh, Douglas, do you really mean this?" and Eunice's girlish heart palpitated with pure happiness that he, her beloved, should have cared for her even then!

"It is true, dear, and I think—I am almost sure that you suspected it; but I was not free. Though there was no engagement between Araby and myself, there was a tacit understanding between us. I had offered my allegiance, and only caprice and girlish coquetry were keeping us apart. Eunice, you must have thought my behaviour strange at times, but a man is not always master of himself. If you knew how I longed to be free, but honour forbad it. My poor Araby depended on me for happiness. I could not forsake her."

"No, indeed, you acted rightly—nobly. But if I had only known!" with a little shiver, as Eunice recalled those days. But the next minute Douglas's lips were pressed to hers.

"It was far better that you should be ignorant, darling, far better that you should think me vacillating and indifferent; and in every way it was better for me. You know the rest, Eunice. I was helped to do my duty, and for a few months I made Araby happy. But perhaps you do not know that I grew to love her dearly. Her sweetness, her devotion would have won any man, and as time passed on I was even contented. If she had lived I do not know if this state of things would have lasted, for our natures were utterly dissimilar, and it was not easy to satisfy her imperious demands for affection, and I could not be unconscious of this. And yet when God took her I was very lonely."

"Yes, I knew it. Oh, how I grieved for you!"

"Did you, dear? But I had no wish even to see you then. It would have been an insult to my wife's memory to think of you; but, all the same, you were not forgotten. I would not go a step out of my way to meet you. And then you came, and the old love revived. Do you remem-

ber that day, Eunice, when you all came to luncheon? Your face was like a ray of sunlight in the old place, but all the same I could not muster courage to speak to you until just at the last. I saw you look at me once so wistfully, but I could not break the spell."

"Dear Douglas, I felt so sorry for you. You looked so changed and grave."

"Oh, I had suffered so much! But all the time I thought how sweet and tranquil you looked. Dear, I can hear your brother's voice. He is looking for us. It is late, and I must go, but you will see me to-morrow."

"And you will tell Lilian, Douglas?" And Eunice looked shyly up at her tall lover.

"Lilian will not need telling. One look at my face will be sufficient. How do you think she will like her new sister?"

But though Eunice made no answer her smile was eloquent enough, and then with a few more parting words Douglas tore himself away.

The next morning, as Eunice had stolen out of the house to enjoy half-an-hour's solitude in the Wilderness, she heard the tinkle of a bicycle bell behind her, and the next moment Lilian dismounted and wheeled her machine into the porch. Eunice watched her without offering her assistance. She stood quite still until Lilian was close to her, and she saw the look in her eyes, and the next moment Lilian's arms were round her neck.

"Eunice, I have scarcely slept all night, I have been so happy. Oh, you darling!—you darling! you have given me my heart's desire!"

"Dear Lilian, do you really mean this?"

"Do I mean it? How can you ask me such a question? But there, I am so giddy with riding in the sun that I must sit down." And then she pulled Eunice down beside her.

"Did Douglas tell you last night?" How Eunice blushed as she spoke.

"No, you dear thing. Douglas never said a word.

He only stood before me like a blissful old giant, and looked at me. You know his solemn way." Eunice nodded. "So I went up to him, and took hold of his arms. 'You and Eunice are engaged, and Eunice is going to be my sister?' That was what I said to him. But I don't mean to tell you the rest."

"Lilian," whispered Eunice, "I have been asking myself half the night if it can be really true. It is far, far too much happiness for any woman."

"What, to be Douglas's wife?" But though Lilian tried to laugh, her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, not only that," stammered Eunice, "though I shall never be worthy of him—never; but to have you for a sister, Lilian. To be with you and him in that lovely home, it is like a dream or a fairy story, or—— Oh, what is that?" as two warm hands that were certainly not Lilian's blinded her eyes. Not even Lilian had heard Douglas's footsteps behind her until he made his presence known in this fashion. The next moment Eunice was released, and he had flung himself down at her feet.

"Douglas, you bad boy!" exclaimed Lilian reproachfully. "How long have you been there? You need not have begrudged me a few minutes with my new sister."

"I object to all monopolies but one," was the cool answer. "I heard Eunice say something about fairyland, so I thought the conversation must be interesting. Please don't let me interrupt you." And Douglas arranged himself comfortably on the bracken, so that he could watch all the bright changes on Eunice's face. They talked together for some time, and then Lilian stole away. Dearly as they loved her, she knew well that in those first hours of their happiness she would not be missed.

As she left the little wood she looked back for a moment. To her fond eyes the scene was idyllic. They had risen, and were standing at that moment under the shade of a copper beech. The dark rich tints of the foliage, the russet and amber of the bracken at their feet,

and the red berries of the rowans beside them made a lovely setting to Eunice in her white dress. The slender figure in its girlish grace looked almost childlike beside her stalwart lover. As Lilian glanced at them the sunlight filtered through the leaves, touching Eunice's brown hair with gold.

She could hear Douglas's deep voice rising and falling as it mingled with the cooing notes of the wood-pigeons, and the girl's fresh girlish tones answering him.

"God bless them!" murmured Lilian as she went slowly down the grassy path that bordered the tennis-lawn. And no feeling of envy or jealousy throbbed in her simple, loving heart. She was telling herself that Douglas's troubles were over. Once he and Eunice had passed each other sadly on the Highway of Fate, and with silent hopelessness had taken their separate paths; but now the changes and chances of life had brought them together again. With the spring a sweet young mistress would come to Monkbarn; Douglas would have his wife and helpmeet, and Lilian the dearest and truest of sisters. The new life that stretched before them seemed fair and full of peace to Lilian.

"I shall not be in the way; they will never wish to part with me," she said to herself. "Monkbarn will be my home as well as theirs. Oh, how content and happy I ought to be; for a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

THE END